Cosplay in Australia: (Re)creation and Creativity
Assemblage and Negotiation in a Material and Performative Practice

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Declaration

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Dedication

In this thesis I have argued that cultural products are never produced in social isolation. Perhaps this argument may also apply to the production of a thesis. Thank you to all the cosplayers, photographers, convention organisers and attendees who I interviewed, photographed and allowed me to hang out with them. Special thanks to members of Team AVCon past and present, and to the Australian Costumers’ Guild. Extra special thanks to The Con Artists. You guys taught me the ‘real’ way to experience conventions and together we learnt so much about c-c-cosplay.

Thank you to the staff and students of the Anthropology Department at the University of Adelaide, particularly all those who regularly attended seminars and coffee. Thanks to Dr. Deane Fergie for introducing me to practice and community of practice approaches. Thanks especially to Dr. Susan Hemer as Postgraduate Co-ordinator who helped me through the most challenging moments.

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Thanks to my family who will be as glad as I am that this document is finally finished.

And, thanks of course to Patrick Korbel who kept frustratingly pointing out the agency and individuality of cosplayers and the variety in cosplay practice. Without your annoying insight this might have been a very different thesis.

(In the spirit of Gell (1998), thank you to my sewing machine and my portable hard-drives. Without you none of this would have been possible.)

vii
Abstract

Cosplay, or ‘costume–play’, is a practice centred upon the assembly and performance of costumes based on pre–existing character designs. This craft and performance practice has its origins in cross–cultural exchange between Japan the United States, and is currently enacted by practitioners in many countries, including Australia. Features of localised cosplay practice appear to challenge and contradict models of practice frequently adopted by anthropologists and sociologists. While traditional models tend to emphasise the role of social structures in the reproduction of practices and characterise practices as developing slowly over time, the practice of cosplay in Australia appears to be highly fragmented, individualised and dynamic. Despite this evanescence, fragmentation, individualisation and variation cosplay exists as a recognisable practice and has produced communities of practitioners who identify as ‘cosplayers’.

Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork within Australian communities of practice, I explore the (re)creation of dynamic, heterogeneous and ephemeral cosplay practice. Utilising an assemblage of perspectives from anthropologies of material culture and performance, two disciplines which have emerged out of post–structuralist interest in practice and process, I characterise the practice of cosplay in Australia as a series of assembly, negotiation and distribution processes. Through an ethnographic exploration of how ‘practices–as–performances’ recreate ‘practices–as–entities’ Reckwitz (2002); Schatzki et al. (2000), I argue that anthropological material culture and performance approaches to practice can expand and challenge traditional generalist models of practice, and provide a more comprehensive understanding of practices that are diverse, ephemeral and more loosely structured.
## Contents

1 Introduction 1  
   1.1 Practice and Anthropologies of Performance, Craft and Consumption 5  
   1.2 Long-term Routinization and Evanescent Practice 6  
   1.3 Structure and Improvisation 7  
   1.4 The Problem of Variation 8  
   1.5 Understanding Dynamic and Heterogenous Practice: Assemblage, Negotiation and Distribution 10  
   1.6 Assemblage and Distribution 11  
   1.7 Negotiation 15  
   1.8 The Structure of the Thesis 17  
   1.9 Conclusion 18  

2 Locating the field: How methodological challenges uncovered a theoretical problem 21  
   2.1 A Globalised Practice 22  
   2.2 Placing the Field 27  
   2.3 Events as Observer 28  
   2.4 Difficulties Getting ‘Backstage’ 32  
   2.5 Decision to Participate 33  
   2.6 Online Participation 37  
   2.7 Participants 38  
   2.8 Conclusion: From Field to Theory 43  

3 How to Cosplay: Performing Cosplay Aesthetic Values at Convention Panels 45
### CONTENTS

3.1 The Panel ................................................. 46
3.2 The Performance of Cosplay Values and Skilled Vision .......... 47
3.3 Who Teaches? Who Listens?: Establishing Authority ............. 51
3.4 Accuracy ................................................. 54
3.5 Completism ............................................. 58
3.6 Spectacle ................................................. 61
3.7 Amateurism ............................................. 65
3.8 Creativity ............................................... 68
3.9 Conclusion: Cosplay Values and Aesthetics ....................... 70

4 (re)Creating the Costume; (re)Creating the Cosplayer ............ 73
4.1 Copying, Creation and Creativity ................................ 77
4.2 Stages of the Assembly Process ................................ 80
4.3 Choosing the Cosplay ..................................... 82
4.4 Research ................................................... 86
4.5 Collecting ............................................... 93
4.6 Mess ....................................................... 95
4.7 Testing .................................................... 100
4.8 Conclusion: Objectifications, Creativity and Practice .......... 103

5 Looking Right, Feeling Pain: The Costumed Body and the Negotiation of Cosplay Values .............................................. 105
5.1 Bodies in Practice .......................................... 110
5.2 Monstrous Bodies and Bodies as Tools .......................... 112
5.3 Body as Object in Body Projects ................................ 118
5.4 Body as Object in Social Dressing Activities .................... 125
5.5 The Problem of the Painful Body .............................. 129
5.6 Body as Object in Competition Narratives ....................... 132
5.7 Challenging the Body as Costume Object ........................ 135
5.8 Conclusion: Body Debates and the Recreation of Practice ...... 139

6 Playing in Costume, Framing the Performance ....................... 143
6.1 Performances in Times and Spaces .............................. 147
6.2 Getting Into Character ...................................... 152
6.3 Playing the Craftsperson .................................... 167
CONTENTS

6.4 Performing Sexiness ........................................... 173
6.5 Conclusion: Framing the Chaos ............................... 181

7 Performing the Self as Cosplay Master ......................... 185
  7.1 The Assemblage, Negotiation and Distribution of Mastery .... 188
  7.2 Competition Events and the Performance of Community Values ... 192
  7.3 Interviews ..................................................... 196
  7.4 Skits ........................................................... 204
  7.5 The Distribution of Mastery .................................. 208
  7.6 Conclusion: Assembling and Distributing a Master.............. 210

8 ‘Pics, or It Didn’t Happen’: Photography and the (re)Creation of Cosplay 213
  8.1 Photography and the (Re)Creation of Community ............... 215
  8.2 The Photographer ............................................. 217
  8.3 The Profile Picture ............................................ 224
  8.4 Final Fantasies ................................................ 229
  8.5 Doctor Who??! .................................................. 235
  8.6 Tutorial Photography ......................................... 240
  8.7 Conclusion: Happening Things – Assembled Objects and Distributed Selves .................................................. 244

9 Conclusion: Creativity and the (re)Creation of Practice and Practice Theories 247
List of Figures

1.1 Recreation with Variation (Photograph by Patrick Korbel) ............ 2
2.1 Jane working at home .............................................. 35
3.1 “Delphox” (Photograph by Patrick Korbel) .......................... 62
3.2 Spectacular breastplate .............................................. 64
4.1 “Kusuri–uri” (Photograph by Corey Newcombe) ..................... 74
4.2 “Juri” cosplays (Photographs by Patrick Korbel) ................. 90
4.3 “Fluttershy” (Photograph by Patrick Korbel) ....................... 92
4.4 Wig .......................................................... 96
4.5 Construction ...................................................... 98
5.1 “White Queen” .................................................... 106
5.2 “Master Chief” .................................................... 108
5.3 Cat Head ......................................................... 116
5.4 “Jack Skellington” ............................................... 117
5.5 “Kusuri–uri” (Photograph by Corey Newcombe) ................... 119
5.6 Steampunk “Jack” ............................................... 120
5.7 Dressing transformation sequence – #1 ............................ 126
5.8 Dressing transformation sequence – #2 ............................ 127
5.9 Daniel in pain (Photograph by Patrick Korbel) .................... 131
6.1 Dynasty Warriors ................................................... 144
6.2 Map of AVCon from 2011 ........................................... 148
6.3 “Sand Person” and photographers .................................... 150
6.4 Sengoku Basara cosplayer ......................................... 153
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>Fan sequence - photo #1</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Fan sequence - photo #2</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Fan sequence - photo #3</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>Cat and Rabbit</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>Daniel and “Dalek”</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>“Ezio” and “Bane”</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>Renee as “Jessica Rabbit” (Photograph by Emmanuel Photakis)</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>“Elf King” (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Photographers</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Photographers at Oz Comic–Con (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Ethnographer as “Kusuri–uri” (Photograph by Corey Newcombe)</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Final fantasies (Photograph by Nathan from IGotSuperpowers)</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Julia’s belt</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>Ashton as “Doctor Who” (Original photograph by Maetography)</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>Panel with PowerPoint slide</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Introduction

Dressed in a long, flowing blonde wig, a handmade dress of Italian crêpe and carrying a small plastic dragon, I wandered the exhibitors’ hall at Adelaide’s Supanova popular culture convention. I was ‘cosplaying’ as “Daenerys Targaryen”\textsuperscript{1} from the HBO television series \textit{Game of Thrones}. I had taken over a month assembling the outfit, including sewing the dress and sculpting the dragon, and I was keen to parade my handiwork amid the crowds of the convention.

Just outside a comic book stall I caught sight of another woman, also dressed as “Daenerys”. She too wore a blonde wig but her dress was blue with golden features hand-wrought from thermoplastic. Instead of carrying a plastic dragon this “Daenerys” was pushing a pram in which was seated a toddler, dressed in a tiny dragon costume.

Our eyes met and she ushered me over. She told her partner, who was dressed as Daenery’s attendant “Jorah Mormont”, to take a photograph of the two Daeneryses posing together. We chatted, exchanged compliments and smiled as “Jorah” took the picture.

At that moment another blonde–wigged “Daenerys” cosplayer strolled into view. She was also pushing a pram with another toddler dragon seated inside. We invited her to join us and more photographs were taken. By now a small group of convention attendees had gathered to photograph the three of us posing together.

\textsuperscript{1}Throughout the thesis I will use quotation marks to indicate character names.
A few minutes had passed when yet another “Daenerys” cosplayer happened on the scene. This cosplayer was wearing quite a different outfit of torn leathers and a bedraggled blonde wig. A dragon brooch was pinned to her chest.

In less than ten minutes four “Daenerys” cosplayers, previously unknown to each other, had assembled for an improvised photo shoot. Images of us posing together were recorded by more than ten photographers. Photographs of this moment were later shared on the social networking site Facebook where they received comments and ‘likes’.

This photograph Figure 1.1 highlights the striking similarities and differences in our assembled costumes. Certain features are common: we are all wearing blonde wigs with subtle style variations, all of us are bare shouldered and each of our assemblages features some representation of a dragon one on a brooch, two in the form of accompanying small children dressed in dragon costumes who are seated in the prams, and one in the form of a plastic model dragon. Aside from these similarities the costumes are considerably varied with different colours, shapes and textures. Those very familiar
with the television series may recognise that two of the women are recreating a particular costume from Season One, while the two other women are recreating separate outfits from Season Two. Despite these visual differences we all mutually recognised each other immediately as performing the same character. That we were all ‘cosplaying’ as “Daenerys Targaryen”. The spectators and photographers also recognised our various interpretations as representations of the same character.

This photograph provides a micro example of the recreation and creativity that are central to an understanding of the practice of cosplay. The term cosplay (kosupure) is believed to be Japanese in origin, a portmanteau word combining the English words ‘costume’ and ‘play’ (Lunning, 2011). Cosplay is an activity centred upon the assembly and performance of costumes based on pre–existing character designs. These designs, are typically but not exclusively, sourced from popular culture texts films, television series, Western comics, Japanese manga and anime, and videogames. Driven by an affinity for the character or its source text, an admiration for the aesthetics of the character design, or by the desire to create a costume that is valued by the community, cosplayers, those who practice cosplay, can spend considerable time, effort and money in the attempt to recreate character designs in the form of wearable costumes (Lunning, 2011; Okabe, 2012). Growing in popularity in the early decades of the twenty–first century, the practice has developed through globalised exchanges of images, materials, aesthetics, competences and practitioners (Winge, 2006; Lamerichs, 2011; Lunning, 2011; Peirson-Smith, 2013).

This thesis is largely inspired by an issue that I encountered while undertaking fieldwork within Australian cosplay communities of practice. I commenced fieldwork within Australian cosplay communities intending to examine the localisation of a globalised Japanese material culture. However, as I will describe in greater detail in Chapter 2, I quickly began to realise the complexity and dynamism of the field. I became aware that features of this localised practice appeared to challenge and contradict models of practice frequently adopted by anthropologists and sociologists. While models of practice proposed by Bourdieu (1990), Giddens (1984) and others (Shove et al., 2012) tend to emphasise the role of social structures in the reproduction of practices and characterise practices as developing slowly over time, the practice of cosplay in Australia appears to be highly fragmented, individualised and dynamic. Despite this evanescence, fragmentation, individualisation and variation cosplay does exist as a recognisable practice and
has produced communities of practitioners who identify as ‘cosplayers’.

This thesis will explore the (re)creation of dynamic, heterogeneous and ephemeral practice in cosplay within Australian communities of practice. Drawing on an assemblage of perspectives from anthropologies of material culture and performance, two disciplines which have emerged out of post–structuralist interest in practice and process, I characterise the practice of cosplay in Australia as a series of assembly, negotiation and distribution processes. Through an ethnographic exploration of how ‘practices-as-performances’ recreate ‘practices-as-entities’ (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2000), I argue that anthropological material culture and performance approaches to practice can expand and challenge traditional generalist models of practice, and provide a more comprehensive understanding of practices that are diverse, ephemeral and more loosely structured.

Despite thousands of participants engaging in the practice each year, cosplay in Australia is an under–researched practice. However, as this thesis will demonstrate, a study of this developing, dynamic and heterogeneous practice provides an excellent context for exploring the limitations and explanatory power of concepts of ‘practice’ (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Shove et al., 2012) and ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991). With an ethnographic focus on the production of costume objects, performances and photographs, this thesis draws together practice, performance and material culture perspectives to highlight the assemblage, distribution and negotiation processes involved in cultural production.

These insights have developed from ethnographic research which involved considerable personal participation, including the co–creation of cultural products. Becoming a practitioner enabled me to follow this distributed and dynamic practice and to connect the flows of sites, practitioners, goods, knowledges and aesthetics. In this manner I was able explore the assembly, negotiation and distribution of practice.
1.1 Practice and Anthropologies of Performance, Craft and Consumption

Cosplay can be considered as a craft, dress and performance practice, a recognisable ‘continuous entity’ (Giddens, 1984), with specific aesthetic values, forms and activities which are reproduced globally through localised expressions and performances. Recent practice theories emphasise that disparate elements—individuals, communities, materials, competences and meanings—come to be associated through practice (Schatzki, 1996; Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005; Shove et al., 2012). These associations are said to be created and recreated through performances. Fundamental to practice theories is the idea that ‘practices as entities’, patterns of behaviour, enacted in a recognisably consistent manner across different spatial and temporal contexts, are created and recreated through ‘practices as performances’, the moments and instances where particular practices are enacted (Schatzki, 1996; Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005; Shove et al., 2012). The localised everyday actions of individuals are thereby connected with the production of patterns of human activity which can be reproduced across geographical locations over a considerable period of time.

Over the last four decades practice approaches have been influential within anthropology (Ortner, 1984; Ahearn, 2012). Theories of practice, including models proposed by Bourdieu’s (1990) and Giddens’s (1984), and the concept of ‘community of practice’ developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) have been particularly influential within anthropological studies of consumption, material culture and performance. These studies emerged in the same Post-Structuralist contexts as practice theories and share a common focus on process (Mitchell, 2009; Morris, 1995). For anthropology, practice approaches have provided a means of connecting the ‘everyday’, lived experiences and actions of individuals with broader themes, movements and trends on the level of community or society (Ortner, 1984). Material culture and performance studies have used Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of ‘habitus’ to explore the transmission of embodied knowledge in crafts like glass-blowing (O’Connor, 2005) and house-building (Marchand, 2010) and in performance forms like classical ballet (Aalern, 1997; Turner and Wainwright, 2003). Lave and Wenger (1991) concept of communities of practice has been used to explore the development of practitioner identities and the creation and reproduction of community values, skills and knowledge in contexts as diverse as drag queen perfor-
mance (Ronzon, 2007) and Japanese pottery (Singleton, 1998).

However, practice approaches are not without explanatory limitations. Many theorists have argued that models of practice which have been highly influential within anthropology and sociology, including Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of ‘habitus’ and Giddens’ (1984) processes of structuration, do not provide adequate explanations for change, diversity, and evanescence within a particular practice (Warde, 2005; Schatzki et al., 2000; Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). Bourdieu’s and Giddens’ models are useful in explaining how structuration occurs, or how structures are reproduced, but are less useful in explaining variation, creativity and change, particularly within a specific practice (Sewell, 1992).

1.2 Long-term Routinization and Evanescent Practice

Both Bourdieu’s model of habitus and Giddens’ processes of structuration see practices as developing slowly as competences and meanings become associated through routinized performances, and in the case of Bourdieu’s habitus are inscribed upon the bodies of practitioners, over a long duration of time (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984). This idea of the gradual development of practice is echoed in Ortner’s (2006) characterisation of practice theory as a theory of history in which structures can be seen to develop and unfold over time. Long-term routinization is also central to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of practice communities as the authors argue that full membership and participation in a practice community is contingent upon a newcomer spending considerable time acquiring knowledge and skills as a legitimate peripheral participant. Concepts of practice which emphasise development through long-term routinization have greater explanatory power when applied to the well-established traditions and activities often featured in anthropological studies of craft, dress and performance.

As a practice which arguably originated in the early twentieth-century and has only been globally popularised since the millennium, cosplay’s development by contrast has been rapid and multidirectional. Second and third generation practitioners are only beginning to emerge. As I will explore further in Chapter 5 there is no restricted or cohesive set of craft or performative techniques specifically associated with cosplay. Instead in their construction and performance of costumes cosplayers may draw upon an ex-
a tensive body of craft and performance techniques from sewing to leatherwork, plastics moulding, puppetry and acrobatics. Cosplayers may acquire a new suite of skills and knowledge for each costume project. Cosplayers are not repeating and re–performing the same embodied activities in the manner suggested by concepts of longterm routinization.

Posing another challenge to routinization is the fragmentation of the practice. The global movement and exchange of cosplay goods and ideas is complex and multi-directional between Japan and the United States, Europe, South East Asia and Australia. Even within Australian contexts cosplay is highly fragmented. The practice is located in potentially thousands of sites which hold only a tenuous connection with one another. Much of the costume construction and assembly work carried out by cosplayers takes place in the private domestic spaces of their own homes. As I shall explore in greater depth in Chapter 8, online spaces are another important site of practice. However these online spaces are also diverse and fragmented as much of the action is centred upon the individual social networking profiles of individual cosplayers. Cosplayers come together to perform their costumes at temporary events competitions and popular culture conventions held at various times throughout the year. This fragmentation restricts the development of formal and enduring structural organisation. Cosplay is Australia is dynamic and evanescent. The practice is conducted at temporary performance events and in updating and changing digital sites. Although, as I will argue throughout this thesis, cosplay can become an important aspect of practitioners’ everyday lives and can be mundane as well as occasional and spectacular, the practice is far from routinized in the manner suggested by traditional models of practice.

1.3 Structure and Improvisation

Existing models of practice also have difficulty in accounting for change and improvisation(Sewell, 1992). Critics of Bourdieu’s habitus have argued that the model gives too much weight to structure (Sewell, 1992; King, 2000; Warde, 2005). They argue that Bourdieu’s model, in which structures are inscribed upon the bodies of agents to the extent where structures are experienced as embodied and largely unconscious, does not account for the possibility of structural change or variation in practices (Sewell, 1992;
King, 2000; Ahearn, 2012). It has been argued that the strength of the structure in habitus actually contradict Bourdieu’s own emphasis on the improvisation of agents in other writings (King, 2000).

Formal organisations, clubs and associations appear to only loosely structure the practice. While organisations such as the Australian Costumers’ Guild do exist and play an active role in local communities, membership of such a club is not necessary to participate in cosplay or the community of practice. There are no formal training or recruitment processes for cosplayers and no regular schools or classes. Rather, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, cosplay knowledge and skills are shared through performances and through the production and distribution of online written, photographic and video material. Knowledge, competences and meanings related to the practice of cosplay are not strongly regulated by organisations but are instead produced and reproduced in the practices, performances and products of individuals and small, localised communities.

Both Bourdieu’s and Giddens’ models tend to emphasise consensus and easy transmission of knowledges and structures (Warde, 2005). This fails to acknowledge that within practices conventions are regularly challenged and debated (Warde, 2005, p.140–141), or to recognise that structures themselves may be comprised of contradictory elements (Sewell, 1992). A heavy emphasis on structuration also tends to downplay improvisatory aspects of practice as practitioners adapt to changes, new materials and new contexts.

1.4 The Problem of Variation

Arguably the best recent attempt to address the question of practice, change and variation has been provided by Shove et al. (2012) in The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How it Changes. These authors characterise practice as ‘dynamic’, constantly changing and innovative. Their concept of practice avoids some of rigidity of previous models though their characterisation of practices as being comprised of interconnected ‘elements’ after Reckwitz (2002). They argue that a practice is created through the forming of associations between three elements: 1) materials resources, physical objects, tools, 2) competences knowledges, skills and techniques, and 3) mean-
ings ideas, values, and symbols (Shove et al., 2012, p.14). According to their model, new practices are created when particular relationships are established between specific materials, competences and meanings. These associations are established and strengthened through the constant repetition of performance acts. When any of these elements are changed or altered the practice itself is often altered: changes in technology, the design or availability of particular materials; the necessity and accessibility of particular skill sets; or alterations of the meanings associated with a particular activity may all potentially transform a practice. Practices are invented, made obsolete and reinvented when links between particular materials, meanings and competences are made, broken and reforged. The association of old materials with new meanings, or new materials with pre-existing meanings and competences, continually creates variations on existing practices or new practices entirely.

With their ‘elemental’ model the authors have indeed created a more dynamic concept of practice with greater potential for explaining how particular practices come to be formed, maintained and dissolved within historical and cultural contexts. The model also provides an explanation of the durability and importance of particular practices and the brevity and transience of others as the authors, echoing Giddens (1984), argue that practices which are performed or reproduced everyday are those which endure the longest and play the greatest role in practitioners’ lives. While the elemental model provides potential explanations of practice-wide innovation and change it fails to more fully address subtler variations and changes within practices.

As the aforementioned photograph Figure 1.1 demonstrates the cultural products of cosplay can be extremely diverse. Costumes can be inspired by a myriad of texts, and can be constructed from a broad range of materials, using a variety of techniques. Performances can take many forms and incorporate many other theatrical genres including mime, dance, singing and acrobatics. Photographic and video styles are also diverse with a range of photographic genres evident within the practice. How can a model of practice account for stylistic diversity?

Despite its apparent dynamism, evanescence and diversity, cosplay in Australia does exist as a recognisable, continuous entity. A recognisable shared aesthetic has developed, individual practitioners develop ongoing identities as ‘cosplayers’, and distinctive communities of practice are maintained at local and national levels. A set of values concerning the nature of cosplay and how it should be practiced are both recreated
and debated. Cosplayers participate in organised competitions where competitors, their costumes and performances are evaluated against each other. How can such varied activities, objects and performances, produced and enacted in multiple locations all come to be associated with the entity cosplay? A study of cosplay communities of practice in Australia provide an opportunity for an examination of practice itself. How are practices as entities created by practices as performances? How do the micro actions of cosplayers and the products they make create ‘cosplay’ the entity? Can an exploration of “practices as performances” help to reintroduce dynamism, variety and change into models of practice?

1.5 Understanding Dynamic and Heterogenous Practice: Assemblage, Negotiation and Distribution

To attempt to explain the practice of cosplay in Australia I have developed an adapted model of practice. Drawing on my observations from the field, I characterise the practice of cosplay in Australia as a series of assembly and distribution processes. These processes each involve the coming together, distribution and negotiation of various elements: material things, individual practitioners and communities, and result in creation of cultural products: costume objects, performances and photography. These elements come to be meaningfully associated through practice, both physically and symbolically. Associations between elements are assembled and also distributed. Like Gell’s (1998) distributed or extended objects, the associations between assembled elements can endure across space and time. These associations can also be dissolved or broken.

These assembly and distribution processes occur at many levels throughout the practice. Materials, competences, practitioner agency and shared community aesthetics are assembled in the production of costume objects. Photographs of these objects, narratives of its construction and often the objects’ physical components are later distributed back into the community. In performances physical spaces, the embodied actions of performers and the interpretations of audiences are assembled and photographs, videos and narratives of these performances are later circulated through the community. These photographs are themselves produced through an assembly of performers, objects, spaces, photographers and the values of the community. On a broader level, the creation of
1.6. **ASSEMBLAGE AND DISTRIBUTION**

local, national and international communities of practice involves the assembly of individual practitioners, materials, spaces, and technologies.

As any cosplayer is well aware, assemblage can be a messy process. Various elements do not always cohere easily. Every process of assembly and distribution involves negotiation: individuals wrestle with the materiality of objects, spaces and their own bodies. In the production of costume objects and performances individual practitioners are in constant negotiation with a wider community. The aesthetic and ethical values shared within local cosplay communities are not static but are constantly negotiated. As I will explore in further detail in Chapters 5 and 6, constant negotiation is a particularly strong feature of Australian cosplay communities of practice due to the weaker role of structures evident in the practice.

The cultural products of cosplay: costumes, performances and photographs are the products of these assembly, distribution and negotiation processes. They have been assembled by practitioners and are often the result of collaboration between cosplayers and others including spectators and photographers. Cosplay costumes, photographs and performances objectify or enact the processes and negotiations undertaken by their creators.

### 1.6 Assemblage and Distribution

My use of assemblage is partly drawn from the field itself. Within art theory ‘assemblages’ are pieces constructed through the combination of found objects (Waldman and Matisse, 1992). Created from pre–existing images, texts and a wide variety of objects and techniques, cosplay costumes and performances can be considered as assemblages in this sense. Truong (2013, p.5) characterises cosplay as being comprised of interconnected elements: body activities; objects; knowledges; emotions; and intentions. The practice of cosplay itself can be seen as an assemblage.

Marcus and Saka (2006, p.101) have argued that the use of the term ‘assemblage’ in anthropological work is commonly used to characterise social phenomena in an attempt to acknowledge social phenomena that are ‘ephemeral’, ‘emergent’, ‘evanescent’, ‘de-centered’ and ‘heterogenous’. They critique the use of the term in a nebulous man-
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

ner which they argue renders the concept a rather ineffective theoretical tool (Marcus and Saka, 2006). My use of assemblage here, however, is developed out of themes arising in several strands of theory practice theories, contemporary material culture approaches, performance studies and community of practice literature which I shall attempt to weave together. My characterisation of cosplay practices in Australia is itself a theoretical assemblage.

My starting point is Shove et al.’s (2012) ‘elemental’ model of practice. As in the model of practice proposed by Shove and her collaborators, I characterise the (re)creation of cosplay as an entity as occurring through the assembly of various elements in practice as performances. However, in an attempt to re-focus attention on the roles of individual practitioners and communities in developing and recreating a practice my proposed ‘elements of practice’ are somewhat different. I portray the practice of cosplay as being assembled through the association and negotiation of materials, meanings, competences, practitioners and communities.

A common critique of generalising practice theories is that they do not give sufficient attention to agency (Holland et al., 1998; Ahearn, 2012). As a corrective, my model of cosplay practice is also influenced by anthropological literature addressing the role of communities and individuals in the creation and recreation of practice. These theorists emphasise that in order to fully understand the creation and recreation of practice it is necessary to explore the roles of both societies/communities and individuals in these processes (Holland et al., 1998; Miller, 2009; Ahearn, 2012).

Anthropological material culture literature can be used to support the idea of the practice of cosplay in Australia as a series of assembly and distribution processes in a number of ways. Firstly, material culture approaches have long acknowledged material things as dynamic and changeable and that the relationships forged between objects, individuals and communities can be enduring or temporary. The renewed anthropological interest in material culture in the late nineteen-eighties coincided with both an interest in the movement and transformation of objects through processes of globalisation and consumption and the development of practice approaches (Mitchell, 2009, p.384). The characterisation of material culture as dynamic and changeable is reflected in Appadurai’s (1986) notion of the ‘social life of things’, and in Miller’s (1987) processes of ‘objectification’ (Mitchell, 2009, p.385). There is also an understanding within much of the post-structuralist literature on material culture that relationships are forged be-
1.6. ASSEMBLAGE AND DISTRIBUTION

tween materials, practitioners and communities through process. Miller’s work, which has been particularly influential in recent anthropological material culture studies, emphasises human–object relations as the product of dynamic processes, see for example (Miller, 1987, 2009). This emphasis on process is evident in Miller’s (1987) influential revision of Hegel’s ‘objectification’. Miller portrays objectification as an ongoing process whereby individuals, through their interactions with objects or the material world create and define themselves.

Secondly, post–structuralist material culture perspectives recognise both the enduring and evanescent nature of materiality in practice. Material culture perspectives recognise that relationships between material things, individuals and communities can be very closely associated and can endure across time and space (Miller, 1987; Weiner, 1992; Gell, 1998). Miller (1987) views objectifications as one of the key ways that subjects develop relationships and understandings of each other and with the material world. The strength and durability of human object relationships is also emphasised in Weiner’s (1992) concept of ‘inalienable objects’ to describe material things which are involved in cumulative processes identification with particular owners, individuals or groups over significant periods of time. Most relevant to a study of globalised and fragmented cosplay is Gell’s (1998, p.221) notion that material objects can be distributed, geographically and temporally but still connected through style. Artefacts themselves can function as aspects of distributed personhood; artworks, objects and texts can be considered part of the self of the creator(s) that produced them (Gell, 1998; Reed, 2005; Giuffre, 2009). Gell’s concept is particularly relevant when applied to online technologies and genres such photo sharing and blogging which are self–creative and reflexive (Reed, 2005).

However, recent anthropological approaches to materiality have also acknowledged that the relationships between material things, individuals and communities can also be broken and unmade through divestment rituals, through social change and technological innovation (Marcoux, 2001; Norris, 2004). There is also increasing recognition of the ephemeral and dynamic nature of material things themselves. Material things can be transformed, broken, remade and can decay and these processes can happen on both a physical and symbolic level (Douny, 2007; Gregson et al., 2007). Material things may not even maintain a physical form. Recent studies have noted that the relationship between materiality and digitality can be especially fluid (Miller and Slater, 2000; Horst,
2009; Van Doorn, 2011; Salmond, 2012). As I will argue throughout this thesis, ongoing movements between the material and the digital are especially evident in cosplay practices as digital images and texts are used by cosplayers to create physical objects, and physical objects are later photographed, their images uploaded and distributed online.

As with recent material culture approaches there exists within performance studies a strong acknowledgement of evanescence and temporality. Performances are by their very nature temporary and ephemeral (Schieffelin, 1998; Cowan, 1990). Performances events are temporally and spatially bounded and they are framed as being set apart from everyday life (Cowan, 1990; Schieffelin, 1996; Turner and Schechner, 1988). However, these temporary performance events also have the potential to influence everyday cultural life beyond the duration of the performance itself (Bauman, 1975; Turner and Schechner, 1988; Cowan, 1990; Mendoza, 2000). Performances themselves have the potential to transform the social positioning of individuals, performers, audiences and objects or even change social structures (Bauman, 1975; Turner and Schechner, 1988).

Performances are also dynamic and constantly changing. The competences and dispositions of the performer, the material and spatial contexts of the performance and the reactions and interpretations of the audience all produce significant variations even when the performance enacts a pre-existing text, musical work or ritual form (Schieffelin, 1998, p.198–9). All forms of performance, social and theatrical, involve both the reproduction of existing forms or structures and improvisation as even established ideas, forms, or techniques must be recreated in each new performance (Bauman, 1975; Schieffelin, 1998; Hughes-Freeland, 2007). Due to their improvisatory nature performances also involve the practical recreation and variation of styles and traditions (Bauman, 1975; Schieffelin, 1998; Hughes-Freeland, 2007). Performers draw upon past practices, established techniques and genres in the creation of new works. Studies of performance emphasise that creativity and tradition are not inherently contradictory but are instead co-dependent (Hughes-Freeland, 2007). This insight can be applied beyond performance studies to other creative practices, including material practices such as cosplay.
1.7 Negotiation

Within cosplay communities of practice assemblages of objects, meanings, individuals and groups are produced through ongoing processes of negotiation. In their construction of costumes, performances and photographs, individual practitioners must develop their own interpretations and improvisations in relation to community aesthetics and values, the desires and interpretations of other practitioners, and in relation to the material properties of materials, technologies and spaces.

Giddens’ and Bourdieu’s models have difficulty accounting for these ongoing processes of negotiation (Sewell, 1992; King, 2000; Warde, 2005). The community of practice concept, developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), and used by Shove et al. (2012) does explore the role of the individual within a practice to some extent by examining how individuals participate in the reification of values and learn to become members through situated learning. However, these models, particularly in their application to specific case studies, still maintain a strong emphasis on structure. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) ethnographic work on situated learning, which was highly influential on the development of the community of practice model, was largely carried out in contexts where formalised apprenticeship relationships were evident or the practice was a well-established tradition. These established traditions contrast strongly with cosplay’s recent development and fragmented communities.

Lave’s later work and the work of Lave and Holland, see for example (Holland and Lave, 2009), give greater weight to agency as the authors highlight the creativity of the individual who must constantly improvise and respond to new situations. A similar theme can be identified in the work of de Certeau (1984) in his notion of ‘tactics’ to describe the way individuals strategically navigate contemporary consumption. de Certeau’s (1984) ‘tactics’ have been particularly influential in consumption and fan studies, see (Jenkins, 1992) where consumers and fans are largely viewed as active users and interpreters of products and texts.

Anthropological material culture approaches also recognise material things and practices as sites and contexts of negotiation between individuals and communities. Miller (2009) portrays objectification processes as involving the negotiation of contradictions. This theme is particularly prominent in studies of dress practices (Hansen, 2004). As
Woodward (2007b) has argued, embodied dress practices involve intrinsic complications as they are simultaneously public and private, personal and performative. Dress can be a ‘flash point’ around which individual desires, cultural norms and expectations, aesthetics, anxieties and pleasures are negociated (Hansen, 2004, p.372).

Ethnographic studies of dress have revealed that these negotiations can involve the creation, negotiation of many kinds of identities: religious (Banerjee and Miller, 2003; Sandikci and Ger, 2005; Secor, 2002), cultural (Eicher, 1995; Lentz, 1995; Wiley, 2013), gender (Woodward, 2007b; Wiley, 2013), age (Woodward, 2007b), status (Douny, 2011), caste (Banerjee and Miller, 2003), subcultural affiliation (Hebdige, 1979; Hodkinson, 2002). As many scholars of dress practice have argued, these negotiations not only occur on a symbolic level but on a very practical level as individuals buy clothing, select dress items, dress themselves and wear the clothing upon their bodies (Banerjee and Miller, 2003; Woodward, 2007b; Secor, 2002). Beyond the practical dress acts themselves, dress can form the subject of wider discourses within communities (Lentz, 1995). As I will explore throughout this thesis, cosplayers not only assemble and wear costumes they constantly dissect, photograph, write about, evaluate, and discuss costumes and performances.

The dress practice of cosplay involves processes of negotiation throughout the activities of costume planning and construction, embodied performance and digital display and distribution. In cosplay, as in many other dress practices studied by anthropologists, the dressed body becomes a site of negotiation between the desires of practitioners and the aesthetic and ethical values of the community, between the intentions of the performer and the interpretations of the audience or of debate between inherently contradictory community values.

Many performance approaches also emphasise processes of negotiation in the creation and recreation of cultural products. Public events which are set apart from the continuity of everyday life such as rituals or theatrical performances allow communities to reflexively contemplate community values and even negotiate contradictory values (Turner and Schechner, 1988). Anthropological and sociological studies of more prosaic forms of everyday social performance have also emphasised that these performances also require negotiation as individuals strategically present themselves for a community audience (Goffman, 1990). Performances may involve the negotiation and redefinition of identities and cultural values (Mendoza, 2000); the negotiation between individual ex-
pression and conformity to cultural norms (Cowan, 1990); or the negotiation of stylistic tradition and innovation (Hughes-Freeland, 2007). Performances may also negotiate the role and status of material objects in relation to human actors (Mitchell, 2009). The multiple negotiations involved in performance can create ambiguity over the meaning and nature of the performance, posing social risk to performers and audience (Schieffelin, 1996; Cowan, 1990). Performance studies recognise the role of tensions and ambiguities in the (re)creation of cultural products. Like material culture perspectives, anthropological approaches to performance can be used to develop a more dynamic model of practice which acknowledges creativity, improvisation and variation.

While many studies explore dress and performance contexts as sites of negotiation of broader cultural concerns such as gender, ethnicity, nationality and religion, in this thesis I will explore how internal, practice-specific values such as aesthetics and craftsmanship are also negotiated in dress and performance acts.

1.8 The Structure of the Thesis

Throughout this thesis I shall discuss the recreation, negotiation and variation of cosplay practice in Australia through an exploration of both the material and performative elements of the practice. Chapter 2 provides an introduction to the field, outlines key methodological challenges I experienced and explains how, from these challenges I developed this line of theoretical questioning. Chapters 3 to 8 each describe a different activity and component of cosplay practice in Australia. The chapters are organised to approximately trace the life cycle of cosplay processes from photographic inspiration to assembly, to wearing, to performing and then finally to photographic distribution. Each chapter explores a particular activity as a process of assembly and distribution. All chapters further explore how these assembly and distribution processes involve ongoing negotiations: the negotiations between practitioners and material things, between individual practitioners and a wider community, and between particular community values and aesthetics.

Chapter 3 explores the performance of cosplay values at introductory panels. These events assemble members of cosplay communities, masters, newcomers and outsiders. In the performances of panellists, who are typically master cosplayers, the ethics and
aesthetics of the practice are created and recreated. Chapter 4 focuses on the material assembly of costume objects. In the assembly of cosplay costumes, cosplayers recreate images as objects, themselves as practitioners and the values of the cosplay community. Practitioners must use their skills and creativity to work imagery into materiality and must negotiate their own desires and intentions against community values of accuracy and amateurism. Chapter 5 explores the negotiation of the transformed body within cosplay communities. Costume objects, practitioners and communities intersect in new and complex ways when the costume is worn upon the body. The chapter examines a key debate which is enacted throughout Australian cosplay communities; a debate centred upon the question of to what extent a cosplayer can and should transform their body for cosplay. As this debate is played out through practice costumed bodies become sites of negotiation of the contradictory values of accuracy and amateurism. Chapter 6 focuses on hallway performances, largely informal and barely structured performances that take place in the liminal spaces of popular culture conventions. These performances are temporary assemblages of costumed performers, non–costumed and costumed attendees, and photographers. In these loosely structured events performers and audiences negotiate the framing and meanings of these performances. Chapter 7 explores the assembly of the skills, style and values of cosplay mastery as they are embodied in the performances of competitors at local competitions; Chapter 8 explores the assembly and distribution of the practice at a broader level through the creation, presentation, and exchange of photography.

1.9 Conclusion

This thesis will provide an ethnographic account of a practice that appears to embody some of the key concerns of post–structuralist anthropology: practice, performance, materiality, globalisation, the role of the body, and the role of emerging digital technologies in culture and practice.

I aim to reinvigorate the idea of theoretical assemblage through the use of multiple complementary post–structuralist perspectives, using each to expand and critique the other. Using approaches developed from anthropological material culture and performance studies I will explore the role of assembly, distribution and negotiation in practice.
1.9. CONCLUSION

Drawing on current dress and performance studies, I will argue that the reproduction of practice is not a matter of linear transmission but instead involves constant processes of negotiation in which values are created and recreated. In this way I will propose a model of a practice that is highly diverse and fragmented which accounts for its dynamism and heterogeneity, and recognises the role of both individual practitioners and communities in the creation and recreation of practice.

Through an exploration of cosplay as material and performance practice I shall emphasise the connections between anthropological material culture and performance theory, highlighting their shared focus on process and negotiation. This thesis will explore both the performance of materiality and the materiality of performance.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION
Chapter 2

Locating the field: How methodological challenges uncovered a theoretical problem

During my fieldwork period a strange initiation rite was practiced at Australian cosplay competitions. Competitors who confessed to the judges or hosts that this was their first time dressing in cosplay would be required to stand on stage while hosts, judges, other competitors and members of the audience shouted at the initiate, ‘One of us! One of us!’ The chant, as one host informed the audience during mid–competition banter, is drawn from the film, *Freaks* (1932) depicting carnival side show performers. The scene is most familiar to cosplay audiences through its parody recreation in an episode of *The Simpsons*. Scene and ritual both represent the entry of a newcomer into a community of practice, a community which views itself as existing adjacent to, or outside of mainstream culture. This little ritual emphasises that within Australian communities of practice it is held that participating makes a person a cosplayer. Assembling, wearing and publicly performing a costume bestows upon a person the identity of cosplayer and provides entry into the community of practice; to understand cosplay fully, to be ‘one of us’, a person must cosplay and be a cosplayer.

This chapter provides an introduction to the field of cosplay in Australia and outlines my methodological approach. I describe how I entered the field intending to explore the localisation of a globalised material culture and aimed to conduct materially–orientated
fieldwork of the style advocated by (Geismar and Horst, 2004). However, in the field I experienced numerous methodological challenges related to the multi–sited, fragmented and dynamic aspects of cosplay as a practice. Adapting my methodology with a slightly different approach advocated by Coy (1989), I focused on participating heavily in the practice myself, participating firsthand in the creation and recreation of material culture. I also observed and recorded many narratives of the creation of costume objects, performances and photographs. These narratives were constantly told throughout my fieldwork, during assembly activities and rehearsals in competition and panel performances, online in blogs, Facebook and during structured interviews.

Through this emphasis on participation I was able to begin to understand the connections between sites, objects, texts, individual practitioners and organisations. The methodological challenges I experienced also highlighted theoretical questions as to how cosplay actually functions as a practice, how such diversity and fragmentation can also be structured and somewhat continuous, how to account for recreation and creativity.

2.1 A Globalised Practice

To devotees of cosplay my decision to study the practice in Australia may seem an odd choice of location. Throughout my fieldwork local cosplayers I interacted with constantly assumed that I was primarily interested in Japanese cosplay and would ask me whether I had been to Japan and when I was planning to go there. The idea of the ‘Japaneseness’ of cosplay is quite prominent in Australia (Bainbridge and Norris, 2013). The Madman National Cosplay Championship (MNCC) explicitly promotes this idea on its website:

We welcome entries for costumes that are from Japanese anime, manga and video games. This contest is a celebration of Japanese anime and cosplay culture. (MNCC website, accessed 20/7/13)

The prize for winning the MNCC Grand Final is a trip for two to Japan.

These comments reflect the heavily globalised nature of cosplay which has been noted by a number of authors (Winge, 2006; Lamerichs, 2011; Lunning, 2011; Peirson-Smith, 2013). A more traditional approach to an ethnography of cosplay as a globalised prac-
2.1. A GLOBALISED PRACTICE

tice may have been to ‘follow the thing’, exploring the local manifestations of cosplay at multiple sites (Marcus, 1995; Appadurai, 1997). This approach has been adopted by numerous ethnographers exploring globalised phenomena, including practices and material culture (Wulff, 1998; Strauss, 2000). These ethnographies ‘follow the thing’ across related multiple sites. The idea that one can ‘follow the thing’ implies the existence of a trajectory that the ethnographer can trace. Unfortunately, the global development and dispersion of the practice of cosplay is a very difficult thing to follow. This is partly due to cosplay’s nature as non–mainstream practice which receives only occasional media and academic attention, but mostly due to the fact that cosplay is the product of countless cross–cultural exchanges assemblages of people, objects, information, events, spaces and performances. Scholars and fans alike are not even certain of where or when the practice originated (Winge, 2006).

From out of the haze surrounding the beginnings of cosplay a number of origin myths have arisen as means of explaining where cosplay came from and what cosplay is. These origin myths are discussed in published articles, on fan websites and forums and in the conversations of cosplayers. As cosplayers themselves noted, these origin myths reflect the understandings and motivations of the cultural contexts in which they were produced. These origin myths have a kind of power to shape cosplay as it is currently practiced as they provide cosplayers with an imagined ‘authentic’ model to hearken back to and a standard to define the boundaries of what is and is not cosplay.

The most popular origin myth that I encountered in English–language cosplay texts describes cosplay as originating from costuming activities in the United States. According to this myth, the origins of cosplay can be traced back to American fans dressing up to attend fantasy and science fiction conventions in the late sixties and early seventies (Lamerichs, 2011; Lunning, 2010; Winge, 2006). This version of the origin story privileges Western texts, costumers and events. The original Star Wars film trilogy, the original series of Star Trek and the film The Rocky Horror Picture Show are particularly identified as key texts that inspired and popularised American fan costuming practices (Lamerichs, 2011; Lunning, 2010; Winge, 2006). One variation of the myth posits an even earlier point of origin suggesting that the original cosplayers were superfans Forrest J. Ackerman and Myrtle R. Jones who attended the 1939 1st World Science Fiction Convention in New York in science–fiction inspired outfits (Flynn, 2005).
Also seen as influential in the development of cosplay in the United States are the costuming practices associated with historical re-enactments, especially the activities of US Civil War re-enactment societies and the enduringly popular Renaissance Fairs (Lamerichs, 2011). The costuming activities described in these myths share two common features: the costumes were worn in public contexts rather than in domestic or private settings such as an in-home costume party, and the costumers are described as drawing inspiration from pre-existing models or texts.

In this myth Japanese fan-costumers are portrayed as adopters, refiners, and redistributors of American costuming practices. The export of US costuming practices to Japan is typically described as being centred upon one particular mythological moment in 1984 when Nobuyuki Takahashi, president of Japan’s Studio Hard, visited the Los Angeles Science Fiction Worldcon. According to this myth Takahashi was so impressed by the costuming activities of American fans that he described their costumes with accompanying photographs in Japanese magazines. He is also considered the author of the portmanteau word cosplay (kosu-pure) from the English terms ‘costume’ and ‘play’ (Lamerichs, 2011; Lunning, 2010; Winge, 2006).

Interestingly, these accounts of the development of cosplay all portray the movement as having twentieth-century origins and writers do not usually attempt to link cosplay activities with the history of professional theatrical, film and television costuming or to older dressing-up practices associated with liminal rituals like Mardis Gras or Carnivale. Even the annual American tradition of Halloween with its carnivalesque dressing-up and performance is not commonly cited as playing an important role in the development or continuance of cosplay, although some US cosplayers jokingly refer to the holiday as ‘National Cosplay Day.’

A second popular myth actually inverts the US-as-originator model in suggesting that Japanese fans were, in fact, the first to practice cosplay-like costuming activities, activities that were later exported to South East Asia and the West (Galbraith, 2013; Bainbridge and Norris, 2013; Truong, 2013; Winge, 2006). As scholars and participants both noted, definitions of what actually constitutes a ‘Japanese’ cultural product are constantly problematized by the globalised nature of contemporary media and fan cultures (Iwabuchi, 2002; Tobin, 1992). Many supporters of the Japan-as-birthplace myth do not argue that Japanese cosplay is inspired by exclusively ‘Japanese’ texts. Cosplayers in Japan are seen as drawing inspiration from Japanese and non-Japanese texts.
with costumes inspired by characters from the Western *Harry Potter* franchise or the Japanese mecha series *Gundam* both being defined as cosplay (Galbraith, 2013; Winge, 2006).

In interview, experienced Adelaide–based cosplayer Jenita argued that drawing distinctions between Japanese and non–Japanese sources for cosplay actually violated the spirit of authentic Japanese cosplay which, she argued, drew no such distinctions. In Jenita’s retelling of the origins of cosplay the practice was started by Japanese fans dressing up as characters from Disney films.

A third, less popular theory attempts to reconcile both these myths by arguing that what practitioners recognise as cosplay today arose from separately evolving costuming traditions that developed in the United States and Japan which, due to globalisation, eventually fused in the final decades of the twentieth–century (Lunning, 2010; Winge, 2006).

All the aforementioned myths share a striking and important feature in that they characterise the United States and/or Japan as centres of the cosplay practice and cosplay in all other countries is designated to the periphery. These myths do not seem to explain the dominance of groups characterised as practising on the periphery like the Brazilian and Italian cosplayers who have been far more successful at the World Cosplay Summit than their counterparts from the United States. Indeed, at the time of writing, Brazilian and Italian teams had each won the Japan–based competition more frequently than even the home team. The aforementioned accounts also fail to explore the role of other regional ‘centres’ in Europe and South East Asia.

Academic and practitioner accounts describe multiple flows of cultural goods and ideas related to cosplay. Strauss (2000) has highlighted some of the difficulties facing an ethnographer attempting to follow a dynamic and multi–sited practice, particularly the problem of where to locate the research activities. The ethnographer attempting to study cosplay is faced with a myriad of potential sites for conducting research into the practice. While Japan and the United States are commonly identified as centres of cosplay practice, should an ethnographer also consider alternative centres such as the United Kingdom, Brazil and Italy? Should periphery locations also be explored? Critics of multi–sited ethnographies have often raised concerns as to the extent an ethnographer can achieve significant immersion and rapport with participants if they are conducting
short–term research at a number of field sites.

Of the limited research currently being conducted into cosplay by anthropologists, sociologists and other scholars, many studies have focused on supposed centres of cosplay by exploring cosplayers in Japan (Okabe, 2012; Kawamura, 2013; Galbraith, 2013) and in the United States (Lunning, 2011; Gunnels, 2009). Research on supposed periphery locations of cosplay including studies of cosplayers in Hong Kong (Rahman et al., 2012; Peirson-Smith, 2013) and Italy (Vanzella, 2005) is slowly growing.

Before commencing this research I was aware that cosplay was being practiced in Australia. Like others, I had strongly associated the practice with Japan. In newspaper articles and online sites I viewed images of cosplayers in my home city of Adelaide, who had recreated these globalised aesthetics and performance forms in local parks, streets and universities. I was intrigued by the local manifestations of this globalised practice and I was keen to explore how practitioners in Australia were interpreting cosplay in relation to other sites such as Japan and the United States.

Australia is currently an under–researched periphery location. Norris and Bainbridge (2009; 2013), who have conducted the most in–depth study of the Australian cosplay scene to date, argue that Australian cosplay communities emerged predominantly out of local Japanese anime, manga and videogame fan communities which have developed since the nineties. They argue that local fan–centric industries including anime and manga distribution company Madman Entertainment have also played an active role in fostering the development of these communities (Norris and Bainbridge, 2009).

Australian cosplayers also participate in cosplay on a globalised level through competing in international competitions such as the World Cosplay Summit (Bainbridge and Norris, 2013). My fieldwork included countless moments where the global and the local intersected through cosplay: receiving specialty cosplay wigs posted from Hong Kong and Shawnee, Oklahoma; chatting with a Malaysian–born cosplayer who created his first cosplay for an Australian convention; watching video tutorials on fibreglass techniques by Canadian cosplayers, perusing the racks of pre–made cosplay costumes at the Bodyline store in Harajuku, Tokyo. Australian cosplay, therefore, provides an intriguing point of intersection between local and global, centre and periphery.


2.2. PLACING THE FIELD

2.2 Placing the Field

The practice of cosplay can be considered multi–sited as the global dispersion of cosplay has created communities of practice in many different geographic locations. However, even at the localised level of a particular geographic region, the city of Tokyo or the city of Adelaide, the practice is difficult to place. The dynamism and multi–sited nature of many contemporary practices poses particular challenges for ethnographers (Mahon, 2000; Strauss, 2000). A field site can no longer be seen merely as a geographical location, but rather may be viewed as an intersection between people, practices and shifting terrains, both physical and virtual. The ability to observe ideas, images and practices, and pursue a network of personal and institutional leads makes any location into ‘the field’ (Strauss, 2000, p.171).

While broader, more dynamic conceptions of the field do capture features of contemporary fieldwork, in order to manage the practicalities of ethnographic fieldwork, to conduct interviews and participant–observation, the ethnographer must still define for themselves a field in which to carry out their work. In the case of Australian cosplay the question of where I should position myself posed a considerable conundrum.

In contrast to many other practices studied by ethnographers, such as craft and performance traditions, cosplay has no formal schools or training organisations and there are few formal clubs and associations (Okabe, 2012). Australian cosplay has a large online presence but rather than being concentrated upon a central site it is fragmented with cosplay activities being conducted on social media sites such as Facebook, convention organising sites and forums, and image sharing sites such as deviantART and Flickr. The multi–media nature of the practice with its incorporation of craft, performance and photography activities provides a further layer of complexity as these activities can take place in different online and offline locations.

Previous studies of cosplay have tended to focus on cosplay as a performance act and therefore have been located around sites where performances are enacted, popular–culture conventions, other public events and photoshoots, see for example (Rahman et al., 2012; Peirson-Smith, 2013; Lunning, 2011). Many of these studies acknowledge online sites of cosplay activities and domestic sites of cosplay crafting but due to the authors’ focus on performance moments, these locations are rarely explored in depth.
and the relationships between the different sites of cosplay practices are also under-researched.

Studies which focus mainly on the performance sites of cosplay fail to fully recognise the multi–sited nature of the practice. Cosplay is a moveable feast; performances are prepared, costume objects are researched and assembled in practitioners’ homes before practitioners, objects, performances and communities are brought together at large, temporary events. Practitioners also move constantly between online and offline spaces as they research techniques, share knowledge and display photographs. To fully capture the dynamism of the practice and to explore the relationships between multiple sites I would need to devise a methodology that would be flexible enough to enable me to move between sites ‘following the practice’ (Strauss, 2000). I began by following Australian convention events.

2.3 Events as Observer

I commenced my fieldwork as an observer at local Australian popular culture conventions. Conventions, or ‘cons’, are important sites of fan practices and consumption, where activities such as the buying and selling of merchandise, screenings, costume and fan art competitions, karaoke, and videogame tournaments take place. Some conventions celebrate specific types of popular culture texts videogames, Japanese manga and anime, Western comics while others more broadly encompass almost any form of popular culture.

Most of the major Australian cities play host to at least one annual convention: Adelaide’s AVCon, Melbourne’s Manifest, Sydney’s SMASH, Perth’s Wai–Con, and Hobart’s AICon. Since many of them were founded in the early 2000’s these conventions have become increasingly popular with recorded attendance numbers of over 5,000 at Adelaide’s AVCon, and over 13,000 at Manifest, Melbourne’s Anime Festival in 2009. Many of these Australian conventions are run by small non–profit organisations which are comprised of a few members of paid staff and a substantial number of volunteers. These organisations are often associated with university anime clubs, with many early Australian conventions being staged on university grounds (AVCon website 2010; SMASH website 2010).
Conventions have been identified as important sites of cosplay performance as they host both formalised cosplay competition events and provide the less structured spaces of convention halls, where cosplayers are able to display their costumes to spectators and interact with other cosplayers and photographers (Lunning, 2011). Many conventions explicitly encourage cosplay and promote cosplay activities in their advertising material. These activities include panels and workshops (to be discussed in Chapter 3), as well as cosplay–themed games and parties.

In the course of my fieldwork I attended thirteen Australian popular culture conventions, including both volunteer–run conventions organised on a not–for–profit basis and for–profit conventions staffed by paid employees. Nine of the conventions were themed around the celebration of Japanese popular culture anime, manga and videogames and the other four conventions were dedicated to popular culture more generally, often with a more Western focus. All of these convention events were held in major capital cities.

In the first months of my field work I attended conventions as an observer, not as a participant. I took field notes, photographs and made video recordings of performances. Observing at conventions provided me with my first, outsider’s glimpse into the activities of cosplayers and their communities of practice. Exact numbers of participants in the Australian community are difficult to estimate. According to survey data collected by organising committees, individual convention events sites where cosplay is commonly practiced have attracted over ten thousand attendees, the majority of whom are aged between 16 and 35. However, the number of attendees who participate in costume is unrecorded.

Previous studies of cosplayers in Japan, the United States and Hong Kong have characterised cosplay as a practice typically enacted by young adults (Okabe, 2012; Lunning, 2011; Rahman et al., 2012; Peirson-Smith, 2013). From my observations of local events this also appeared to be true of cosplay in Australia but I did regularly encounter cosplayers in their forties and older throughout my fieldwork. Many teenage cosplayers also attended local cosplay events and their activities were observed and discussed by informants. However, my key informants were all adults and teenage cosplayers were

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1Discussion of conventions’ survey and demographic data, Interview with Dustin Wilson, AVCon Promotions Co–ordinator 2010.
not a focus of my research.

Studies of non–Australian cosplayers also tend to characterise cosplay as a female–dominated practice (Okabe, 2012; Lunning, 2011; Rahman et al., 2012; Peirson-Smith, 2013; Galbraith, 2013). From my observations at conventions and competitions there did seem to be slightly more active female participants within Australian communities. However, throughout my fieldwork I regularly encountered male cosplayers and other male participants, particularly photographers, who were influential members of the community as cosplay judges, event organisers and master cosplayers. While other studies have portrayed cosplay as a feminine fan activity, in opposition to other, apparently male–dominated fan practices, see for example (Lunning, 2011), the visibility of male cosplayers within the Australian community and the position of male participants in powerful roles have led me to reject this characterisation in relation to Australian communities.

Most studies of cosplay tend to restrict their focus to community participants who wear cosplay costumes (Okabe, 2012; Lunning, 2011; Rahman et al., 2012; Peirson-Smith, 2013). Within Australian communities the idea that to be a cosplayer explicitly involves the public wearing of costumes is also prevalent. However, while during my fieldwork I intended to focus predominantly on cosplayers through my participation in cosplay practices I encountered many other participants who interacted with cosplayers in a variety of ways photographers, convention organisers, fans and friends of cosplayers. Certain non–cosplaying participants, especially photographers, play crucial roles in the creation and maintenance of cosplay communities of practice, and their roles are acknowledged and discussed in a limited way in this thesis.

When I began my fieldwork I was an outsider to cosplay practice communities. I had never participated in cosplay or attended a cosplay event. I thought I did not know any current practitioners, although later in my fieldwork, school friends, work colleagues and acquaintances began to reveal to me their participation in cosplay. When I initially attended conventions and other events I attended alone.

As an outsider I was positioned in the role of observer. I could attend cosplay–related activities such as panels, competitions, and games. Like other non–cosplaying convention attendees, I was also able to observe cosplayers as they ‘hung out’ and performed in the informal spaces of the conventions, hallways, courtyards and corridors. From these
activities I was able to record the form and content of many cosplay performances, to experience these performances as an audience member and to hear and record narratives of costume construction.

Reviewing my fieldnotes and recordings I noted that the data I had collected tended to emphasise the performative aspects of cosplay. I had collected photographs and descriptions of hallway performances, created transcripts of panels and competitions. An emphasis on performativity is notable in many previous studies of that have been carried out by researchers who do not personally participate in the practice (Lunning, 2011; Lamerichs, 2011). As in the case of previous researchers, my non–cosplaying status was positioning me as a spectator. I was viewing cosplay like other non–cosplaying convention attendees, as an outsider. While the spectacular and performative aspects are an intrinsic element of the practice, cosplay as a practice exists beyond conventions and other events and is intertwined with more mundane aspects of practitioners’ everyday lives.

Anthropological approaches to material culture, consumption and practice emphasise the importance of exploring the everyday aspects of consumption, not just the spectacular (Miller, 1998, 2001b). The importance of domestic spaces as crucial sites of consumption practices has been repeatedly emphasised and explored by theorists of practice and material culture. As Miller (2001b) argues, domestic contexts are spaces where some of the most meaningful social practices are enacted. Domestic spaces are important sites for cosplay in Australia. In interview and competition narratives cosplayers often described how they would undertake cosplay assembly activities in their homes or the homes of others. Indeed the greater part of the cosplaying year is spent preparing costumes for intermittent events. With the focus of the current cosplay literature on performance events, these domestic spaces have been neglected and their role in their creation of cosplay objects underemphasised.

While observations at events provided an excellent source of information on the performance of cosplay at events, I knew from the narratives provided in panels and competitions that this equally important world of cosplay existed where costumes were constructed, skills acquired and ongoing relationships were developed. To explore the craft aspects of the practice I would need to access the ‘backstage’ (Goffman, 1990) sites of cosplay assembly, the private homes of cosplayers and their friends and families.
2.4 Difficulties Getting ‘Backstage’

For me gaining entry into the hidden world of cosplay assembly and performance preparation was initially rather difficult. Mahon (2000) argues that gaining access to the backstage areas of cultural production poses a particular challenge for ethnographers as these areas may be deliberately hidden from outsiders for commercial, political or practical reasons. Gaining access to these backstage regions relies on the strength of the relationship between ethnographer and participants (Mahon, 2000). As an outsider to the practice it was initially difficult for me to develop an ongoing engagement with individual cosplayers and develop the rapport necessary to access the more ‘everyday’ world of cosplay. These difficulties can be attributed to two main factors: the transient nature of the convention events I was studying and my own ambiguous role within the practice communities.

The temporary and dynamic nature of convention sites meant that establishing ongoing relationships with participants was challenging. The constant movements of people in and out of fieldsites can make it challenging to apply traditional fieldwork methods and may create difficulties in establishing rapport (Mahon, 2000; Strauss, 2000). I would fly to a new city for the duration of the convention weekend and spend it attending convention events before flying home. In the course of each event I would be one of tens of thousands of participants who were moving between event spaces, coming and going from the convention to hotels, homes and private parties. Cosplayers, convention volunteers and others participating at these events were often willing to engage in a brief chat but had neither the time nor inclination for longer discussions or to participate in follow up interviews.

As I quickly learnt, attending convention events alone is not common practice among cosplayers in Australia. Conventions and other events are seen as opportunities to reinforce pre–existing bonds of acquaintance or friendship. Cosplayers, especially typically attend in groups, sometimes in complementary costumes. Attending in groups provides cosplayers with attendants to carry bags, equipment, fix props and share any potential feelings of embarrassment at being in public in costume. At a smaller event in Brisbane my solo status was remarked upon by other attendees who expressed amazement that I had come alone and commented that it would be very difficult attending an event without the support of others. Attending events alone accentuated my outsider status as I
was not participating in the event in a typical manner.

Adding to the difficulty of establishing relationships was the ambiguity of my status. I was often provided with an entry pass that identified me as ‘Media’. My recording and photographic equipment was inferior to that used by many cosplay photographers and other participants, and cosplayers and convention organisers alike were often confused and a little disappointed when I explained that I was conducting academic research. My research activities would not provide significant media coverage and exposure for individual cosplayers or particular conventions unlike representatives from the commercial and independent media who were also present at these events. While ethnographers in other at other sites may be conspicuous as the only person present with a camera and recording devices, at conventions I was only another lens among thousands and a very unimportant one at that. Convention organisers, attendees and cosplayers were all extremely busy participating during convention events and were keen to spend their little available time engaging with broadcast journalists and well–known cosplay photographers rather than an ethnographer.

It became clear to me that in order to access the backstage world of cosplay, to develop ongoing rapport with cosplayers, to understand the connections between different sites, activities and objects I would need to participate in cosplay myself.

### 2.5 Decision to Participate

As I hope to demonstrate throughout this thesis, the practice of cosplay itself is centred upon participation. From my first day in the field I was invited to participate. Cosplayers, panellists and stall holders all told me that I should cosplay for two reasons: to gain a better understanding of the practice and because I was assured that I would ‘have more fun.’

In Australian communities the term ‘cosplay’ is used both a noun and a verb. Cosplay as a noun can refer to the collective activity but also to ‘a cosplay’, a costume and/or the embodied performance of that costume. ‘To cosplay’ is the act of participating in cosplay, creating costume objects and performing in costume. This linguistic titbit is surprisingly revelatory as the multiple meanings of the word are reflective of the activity
itself the importance of costume objects, performances, and the notion of cosplay as both individualist and collective. It is through participation that practitioners acquire skills, build relationships, create cultural products, enact the identity of cosplayer and recreate the practice. During fieldwork an ethnographer may be required to adopt a variety of social roles (Harré, 2002). This can include participating in the production of cultural products (Mahon, 2000; Coy, 1989; Lave, 2011). Mahon (2000) in a survey of literature notes that some ethnographers deliberately choose to participate in production as it may be the only means of accessing sites and participants.

Material culture scholars have often highlighted the ways that the “cultural biographies” of things can be traced, revealing histories of interconnections between materials and individuals, communities and sites (Kopytoff, 1986; Hoskins, 1998). Throughout my fieldwork I found that cosplayers were endlessly interested in reflexive narratives of assembly and preparation. Tales of costume object assembly and performance preparation were told in interviews, in hallway and competition performances and online on Facebook conversations, tutorials, forums and blogs. Through these stories I was able to trace back practitioners’ processes and experiences. Connect process, production, and performance. Cosplayers would often verbally follow a photographic image back to the event it was taken, to the costume made for the event, to the character that inspired the costume.

Through my own participation I was able to experience these processes firsthand, creating cultural biographies as well as retrospectively uncovering them. In preparing my own costumes, performances and photos and especially in collaborating with others I could follow creative processes forward in time, observe the planning and design of costumes, watch as ideas for photo shoots became enacted in practice and share feelings of anticipation and anxiety in the preparation of competition performances. In the manner advocated by Coy (1989), my participation also enabled me to position myself as a novice practitioner. As well as recording the practitioner biographies of other cosplayers and photographers I could trace my own movement from community outsider to insider.

Participating in cosplay also enabled me to eventually access the private domestic spaces where many costume assembly activities take place. Initially, most of my domestic-located research was conducted in my own home as I assembled costumes to wear to events. New tools and equipment such as paint, a sewing machine, clay, a hot glue
Figure 2.1: Jane working at home
CHAPTER 2. LOCATING THE FIELD

gun, and a heat gun were purchased and these items began to invade my living spaces. While the materiality of cosplay threatened to take over my domestic space, eventually other cosplayers began to visit my home for collaborative costuming activities. As I formed ongoing relationships with other cosplayers I began to participate in co–creative assembly and preparation activities: I cut fabric on my living room floor with another cosplayer for a jacket we were making together; cosplaying friends got dressed in my bathroom before conventions. Later, I also participated in construction activities in the homes of other cosplayers. I sewed garments on their kitchen tables, viewed where they stored their costumes, and pinned participants into their garments in front of their televisions.

Participating enabled me to connect the backstage construction activities of the home with the front stage performance activities of conventions. I could observe the assembly of cultural products and the accompanying processes of ‘objectification’ (Miller, 1987) as cosplayers constructed costumes, rehearsed skits and prepared their bodies for performance. As a correction to previous studies’ emphasis on performance, an exploration of backstage sites enabled me to observe and participate in the meaning–making, relationship building, learning and teaching, work and pleasures that take place in these contexts.

Through participating in events as a cosplayer I was able to experience the embodied sensation of cosplay performance. I experienced firsthand what it was like to wear costumes, devise skits, be a competitor, take photographs and be photographed. In contrast to my experiences attending out of costume, my public participation in cosplay at events drew me closer to other cosplayers. Cosplayers were much more willing to spend time with a fellow cosplayer, even one conducting research. My co–participation meant that I could relate to other cosplayers and share experiences. I could exchange narratives of construction with other cosplayers I met in the hallways and foyers. Cosplayers were much more willing to talk with ‘one of us!’ My further participation as a photographer enabled me to learning the skills associated with cosplay photography, the embodied experience of taking photographs and to participate in the activity of sharing photographs which strengthened my bonds with fellow cosplayers.
2.6 Online Participation

Through assembling and performing my own costumes I also became a participant in many online cosplay activities and gained access to further digital sites of cosplay practice. Like other cosplayers I was using online sites and forums to find research materials and tutorials for costumes. I gathered images, viewed photographs of other cosplayers online, read blogs and websites and watched tutorial videos. This introduced me to the diverse ways that cosplay skills and knowledge are taught and distributed online. It also enabled me to experience the ways that these online sources are practically used by cosplayers during costume assembly processes. This is further discussed in Chapters 4 and 8.

As my participation increased I also became involved in the activity of photo-sharing on the social networking site, Facebook and began to recognise the importance of these activities in maintaining the practice and communities. After events pictures of me and other cosplayers would be posted to Facebook on the events’ official pages. I was able to view these images and images of other cosplayers. This both strengthened my bonds with cosplaying and photographer friends, as we would produce, exchange and comment upon images of one another, and enabled me to establish contact with a greater range of cosplayers and photographers. These images also helped establish me as a fellow practitioner within a community, and potential research participants could trace my own online cosplay biography.

Participating as a cosplayer enabled me to recognise the strong relationships between offline and online cosplay sites, and emphasised the flows between offline and online that have been recognised by other theorists (Miller and Slater, 2000; Miller, 2011; Horst, 2009). Echoing ethnographic findings from very different cultural contexts (Miller and Slater, 2000; Miller, 2011; Horst, 2009), offline and online activities are viewed largely as continuous by cosplayers. As I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, in the practice of cosplay the digital and the material consistently intersect as cosplayers use online tutorials to construct costume objects and digitally distribute performances through photography and video.
2.7 Participants

Through my participation in cosplay I moved from outsider to insider status within the practice. Attending conventions, parties and competitions at the beginning of my fieldwork I was interacting briefly with hundreds of transient cosplayers, photographers and attendees. I began following conventions around Australia to major capital cities but as I formed closer relationships with local cosplayers my focus increasingly narrowed to communities in my home city of Adelaide. Towards the end of my fieldwork I was regularly attending convention events as a member of The Con Artists, a cosplay group or ‘circle’ consisting of three women and two men.

In the process of becoming a cosplayer I began interacting with other cosplayers on a one–to–one basis or in small groups as I helped with costume assembly, went on shopping trips and prepared for events. I also conducted in–depth interviews with eight cosplayers, five women and three men, of differing levels of cosplay experience. Interacting with participants and listening to their individual accounts of their experiences helped me recognise the diversity of the cosplay experience. Cosplayers are also individuals with unique histories, memories, personal desires and motivations.

Participation allowed me to connect sites with practices but also enabled me to connect individual practitioners with cosplayer communities of practice. In tracing practitioner biographies I began to learn how people came to enter the practice, the clubs they joined and the circles they moved in, who learnt and who taught. Above all, the experiences of the cosplayers I encountered tended to reflect the argument of Lave and Wenger (1991) that increased participation in the practice correlated with increased community standing. Below I shall provide an introduction to some of the cosplayers I encountered during fieldwork whose activities shall be discussed throughout this thesis. These introductions illustrate the diverse ways it is possible to participate in cosplay, the diversity of cosplayer motivations and costume choices, and also highlight the social nature of cosplay, the different relationships that could be formed through mutual participation in the practice.

Julia

Julia is a young music teacher in her twenties. She became involved in cosplay through her ex–boyfriend, ‘It’s all his fault!’ (Julia, Author’s Interview 2012). He had become
involved in Steampunk parties and events in Adelaide and began organising events with members of the Australian Costumers’ Guild. Julia decided to participate with him and they both joined the ACG, attending frequent meetings and parties. When the relationship ended she continued to participate in costuming activities as a member of the ACG as she had made many other costuming friends within the guild.

Julia wears a large variety of costumes. She identifies Steampunk as her favourite genre of costuming because, ‘It’s so free and nothing is wrong and it’s all about making things yourself, experimenting.’ (Julia, Author’s Interview 2012) However, in recent years Julia has begun to wear more character cosplay. Julia draws inspiration from a myriad of source texts, mostly Western titles. Among the costumes she has worn since 2010 include: “Ramona Flowers” from *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, “Catwoman” from the DC universe, multiple versions of the character “Kaylee” from Joss Whedon’s *Firefly*, “Vampire Willow” from *Buffy*, “Amber” from *Sucker punch*, “Orihime” from *Bleach*, “Merrida” from Disney’s *Brave*, “Alice” from the videogame *Alice: Madness Returns*. Julia is a fan of Western science–fiction and fantasy films and television as well as Western animated content, especially *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and many of the works of Disney.

For Julia, cosplay and other forms of costuming are highly social activities. She continues to attend a lot of costuming events and parties on a near–weekly basis. She also creates costumes with the assistance of her friends. As Julia is only beginning to learn particular techniques, such as machine sewing, she invites friends who are experienced cosplayers to her house or travels to their houses where they teach Julia various skills or work collaboratively on her projects. Julia displays photographs of herself and others dressed in cosplay on her Facebook account. Recently she has also created a separate Facebook account particularly for showcasing her cosplay photography which is listed under her cosplaying name.

Daniel

Daniel, a primary school music teacher and corporate complaints manager, is a newcomer to cosplay. Before attending AVCon in 2012 Daniel was aware of cosplay but
had an ambivalent attitude towards the practice:

I knew there were people who did dress up and stuff but it wasn’t really something I was interested in doing, I didn’t really care about it. I’d think, that’s a cool costume but that wasn’t every really on the radar.

(Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

Daniel had never attended a costuming event or popular culture convention before he attended AVCon 2012 in cosplay with other members of a vocal ensemble, The Con Artists, of which he and I were both members. The group had decided to attend the event in costume to perform ‘geek–themed’ a capella vocal music, similar to the filk songs described by Jenkins (1992). Some of the members of the group were experienced cosplayers and others, like Daniel, had never cosplayed before.

In the course of attending AVCon 2012, hanging out with other cosplayers and watching cosplay competitions, Daniel developed an interest in cosplaying. He subsequently attended other conventions in costume, began creating his own costumes and participated in photoshoots and cosplay competitions. Daniel spends time discussing and researching alternative characters to cosplay. Daniel is a fan of Western science–fiction and fantasy films, television programmes and novels. Among his favourites are the BBC’s Torchwood, Doctor Who, and Merlin and HBO’s Game of Thrones. Daniel’s partner is an avid Harry Potter fan and he enjoys watching and discussing popular culture with his friends and work colleagues. Two Doctor Who encyclopaedias stand on his bookshelf between a Doctor Who board game and his housemate’s statuette of a “Big Brother” from the game, Bioshock. For my birthday Daniel and his housemate gave me a large assortment of Game of Thrones merchandise.

Renee

Renee is a highly–skilled and experienced cosplayer who aspires to eventually develop her interest in costuming into a professional career. Renee describes herself as being
2.7. PARTICIPANTS

interested in costuming from a very young age:

As far as costuming goes, I started just loving costumes as a child. I’ve always loved beautiful clothes. I’ve always liked pretty things and just like dressing up, myself. I think that was the whole reason why when I was little I did a lot of dance and things like that. I was never really so good at the dance but I just liked dressing up and wearing the costumes.

(Renee, Author’s Interview 2012)

Unlike many other cosplayers I encountered during this research, Renee has formal training in costuming elements, particularly stage and film makeup but trained herself to sew. She also participates in other non–cosplay costuming activities including creating costumes for amateur theatre. Renee had long created costumes for herself but views her entry into the community as the moment when she first met members of the Australian Costumers’ Guild while working at an Adelaide moulding and casting specialty store. She ran a workshop for some guild members:

I ran the prosthetics moulding and casting workshops and then I started coming to meetings and I made a lot of friends so I met all these really wonderful people that enjoy the same thing as me. I was always slightly ashamed of the fact that I like dressing up. (Renee, Author’s Interview 2012)

Renee focuses on creating as much of her outfit herself as possible and is constantly striving to try and learn new crafting skills. She asks other guild members to teach her advanced skills and also assists other cosplayers, including Julia, by sharing her considerable knowledge of techniques. Renee has cosplayed as an incredibly diverse range of characters including Disney’s “Tinkerbell”, “Bumblebee” from Transformers, “Pinkie Pie” from My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic, DC Comics’ “Poison Ivy”, and “Jessica Rabbit”. She also actively enjoys mixing cosplay with other costuming and performance genres incorporating acrobatic stunts and creating costumes like a burlesque–themed Tardis from Doctor Who.

Santhosh

Santhosh was born and raised in Malaysia but at the time of my fieldwork he was currently living in Adelaide as a post–graduate research student. While he was aware of conventions being staged in Malaysia, he cosplayed for the first time and attended his
first ever convention in Australia. After seeing cosplayers at AVCon that year he was inspired to try it himself the next. Santhosh said that he felt more comfortable cosplaying in Adelaide as he thought there was a lot of pressure to do it right’ in Malaysian cosplay which he found intimidating.

As a cosplayer Santhosh is a fast learner. His initial costumes were ambitious and detailed. His first cosplay as “Kaname Tousen” from the anime/manga franchise Bleach was a self–created cosplay requiring a considerable level of dress–making skill. Santhosh had never sewn before creating that costume. The next year he competed successfully in the AVCon cosplay competition wearing a full suit of mecha armour which he had creatively assembled from cardboard.

Santhosh enjoys attending cosplay events with friends but particularly enjoys working together with others on creating cosplays. Through the internet Santhosh contacts other cosplayers who are interested in creating similar costumes of the type he enjoys building armour suits, both cosplayers based in Adelaide and cosplayers located in Japan and even Canada. Santhosh compares his work with those creating similar costumes, adapting their techniques to his own purposes or rejecting their techniques and creating his own alternatives.

Ben

Ben is a highly active member of the Australian Costumers’ Guild who assists in the organisation of the guild’s events as well as regularly attending. Like Renee, Ben has a long–standing interest in costumes, and was interested in dressing–up as a child. Ben’s introduction into the cosplay community came about through his participation in a Star Wars fan community when he was living in rural Australia. The last Star Wars prequel film was released in 2005 and Ben decided to join other members of the fan group and travel down to the city premiere in costume.

Ben’s first costume, a set of Jedi robes, was created by a friend but subsequently he has been involved in assembling his own costumes using a variety of techniques including sewing, tailoring, make–up and prosthetics creation. Ben’s costumes mostly draw inspiration from Western texts Star Wars, Star Trek, Harry Potter, Doctor Who and the musicals Sweeney Todd and Les Miserables. He also participates in other costuming genres including Steampunk and historical Victorian costume recreation.
As well as participating in the craft aspects of cosplay Ben is a keen performer. He has participated in cosplay competitions locally and interstate in the skit sections and has won prizes. In addition to his cosplaying activities Ben regularly acts in local amateur theatre productions. As a member of the Costumers’ Guild, Ben is highly active in promoting the guild to the wider cosplay community. He has presented panels on costuming at local popular culture conventions and has been involved in organising and presenting the guild’s information booth at events.

While I established many relationships with cosplayers within local communities, these practitioners and their stories were the most influential in shaping my thesis. Julia involved me constantly in online discussions of costumes she was assembling, allowing me to follow her decision–making processes as she chose materials and learnt techniques. In following Daniel’s journey from novice to celebrated practitioner I was able to trace the progression of a participant in a practice and observe as his skills developed and his values altered. As a leader figure in the Adelaide scene, Ben was present at nearly every convention event I attended. I watched him perform in competition, deliver panels and was occasionally judged by him myself in competition. Renee’s experiences as a professionally trained costumer and makeup artist who still chose to participate in amateur costuming provided particular insights into the unique nature of cosplay contrasted with other forms of costuming. Santhosh, a postgraduate student like me, was one of the most mobile cosplayers I encountered. He had participated in cosplay activities both in Australia and his home country, Malaysia and could draw strong comparisons and contrasts between the different local articulations of cosplay. The diverse experiences, intentions and creative expressions of the cosplayers whom I encountered during fieldwork strongly influenced the emphasis on heterogeneity in practice which is developed throughout this thesis.

2.8 Conclusion: From Field to Theory

In my initial encounters with the practice of cosplay in Australia I struggled to assemble a field. Cosplay appeared to be a series of temporary sites, a constant movement of dispersed individuals, and dynamic flows of myriad images and objects. I found it difficult to position myself and to develop meaningful and ongoing relationships with practi-
CHAPTER 2. LOCATING THE FIELD

I became concerned that my fieldwork would bear out the criticisms levelled against non-traditional forms of fieldwork; I would not experience immersion nor develop rapport with practitioners. I began to seriously doubt whether cosplay in Australia actually existed as a recognisable continuous entity, the definition of practice described by Giddens (1984).

However, through choosing to participate in the practice as a novice cosplayer I was able to immerse myself in the practice and its associated communities and, perhaps most importantly to trace connections the rapidly moving sites, objects, images and practitioners of cosplay. As a practitioner I was able to observe that it is ‘practice-in-performance’ (Schatzki, 1996; Reckwitz, 2002), the doing of cosplay that connects costume objects to performances, novices to masters, sites to photographs, and individuals to communities. To be a cosplayer is to participate in the practice; a cosplay is an assembly of dress and performance put together by a cosplayer. This insight has influenced my focus on practice-as-performance throughout this thesis. In the following chapters I aim to explore how practitioners’ micro-actions and negotiations recreate, with variation, the practice of cosplay as an entity.

My early frustrations that cosplay in Australia did not seem to fit a model of more traditional craft and dress practices studied in other ethnographic contexts led me to consider how cosplay practice actually challenges current models of practice and community of practice. Like many ethnographers in a similar position, I was able to use my struggles to define a field as a means of engaging with a wider theoretical question: how can fragmented, dynamic and heterogeneous practices exist as continuous, recognisable entities across space and time? In my following analytical chapters I shall attempt to address this question in relation to the practice of cosplay in Australia. Through an exploration of specific activities enacted within Australian communities of practice – panels, costume assembly, dressing activities, hallway performances, competitions and photography – I shall explore how each of these activities contributes to the recreation of the practice as a whole.
Chapter 3

How to Cosplay: Performing Cosplay
Aesthetic Values at Convention Panels

His headband is missing the symbol of Konohagakure...

(Author’s Fieldnotes, 2011)

The presenter is correct. The cosplayer in the photograph displayed behind her on a PowerPoint slide has neglected a key detail in his “Rock Lee” costume. The cosplayer’s red ninja headband, which the character tends to wear wrapped around his waist, is missing a metallic plate with a carved symbol of the Konohagakure (Village Hidden in the Leaves). Within the realm of the anime *Naruto* (Kishimoto 2002) headbands have a special significance as they serve as a visual reminder to the audience of the character’s allegiance to one of many competing ninja villages.

Attention to detail is very important to the creation of good cosplay, the presenter reminds her audience. The forty of us, seated in rows of identical convention seating, watch quietly as the presenter dressed as the male character “Grell” from the anime/manga *Kuroshitsuji* (Toboso 2006) gestures to another PowerPoint slide. The second slide contains a photograph of a second, different Rock Lee cosplayer. The presenter draws attention to the cosplayer’s eyebrows, noting with approval that the cosplayer has used makeup to enhance their thickness, increasing his resemblance to
the bushy–browed character. This cosplayer has arranged his body in a dynamic pose, a martial arts fighting stance apparently regularly performed by the character. The presenter praises the cosplayer’s pose and points out that this cosplayer has accurately recreated Rock Lee’s headband, Konohagakure symbol and all. It is ten–thirty in the morning on the first day of a major Australian anime convention and we are attending the cosplay panel.

3.1 The Panel

My formal introduction to cosplay was the Australian Costumer’s Guild panel held at AVCon 2010, the first popular culture convention event I had ever attended. Upon arriving at the event I was amazed and, as I described in my field notes, ‘sensorially–overwhelmed’ by the number, variety, colour and spectacle of so many costumed bodies. Examining the event booklet provided by the organisers, I decided to attend all the costume–related scheduled activities for that day. That morning I sat myself down amongst other convention attendees, costumed and un–costumed, in a small conference room as two costumed men explained how to become involved in costuming. From that time on throughout my fieldwork I would attend panels at any event which included them as part of its schedule. This resulted in my attending over twenty panels in the course of my research.

Panels are a particular event at Australian popular culture conventions where a presenter (or multiple presenters) delivers a lecture to an audience on a particular topic. A ‘question and answer’ session where the presenter responds to questions from audience members is also typically included as a component of the presentation. Panel–style events are included as part of nearly all Australian conventions; recent SMASH, Manifest, AVCon and Wai–Con conventions have all featured panels as part of their scheduled events. For example, AVCon in 2010 scheduled ten panels to run as part of their two–day convention.

Panel events at large, well–funded or for–profit conventions may be presented by members of the anime, television, film and videogame industries such as directors, actors, seiyuu (voice actors), and videogame developers. As Jenkins (1992) in his exploration of North American Science Fiction conventions argues, this style of event can be seen
to provide industry members with a forum to promote their work and an opportunity for fans to engage in contact with the creators of their favourite works. Panels conducted by industry members are particularly prominent at large North American and European conventions.

In the case of non-profit Australian conventions, however, the costs and challenges of attracting members of the anime and videogame industries to speak at local conventions have led to a large proportion of panels being centred on anime and videogame related fan activities, presented to fans by fans, as it were. The topics discussed in these panels may include fan discussion of particular texts or genres of texts.

A popular style of fan-centred panels purports to instruct an audience in how to engage in particular fan-activities or to perform particular techniques such as drawing fan art, writing fan fiction, constructing models, or creating anime music videos (AMVs). Cosplay panels have featured at nearly every Australian non-profit convention (and at every convention that includes panel events). They typically fall into this second category of panel as their content is usually focused on the topic of how to construct a cosplay costume or more specific elements such as how to pose for cosplay photography, construct armour or apply makeup.

3.2 The Performance of Cosplay Values and Skilled Vision

Although panels are ephemeral performance events presented to a limited audience, an audience broadened when panels are recorded and shared online, they provide a fruitful starting place for the analysis of cosplay communities of practice as in these events panellists and their audiences attempt to present and define the nature of cosplay. This chapter will explore the performance of cosplay values and the (re)creation of communities in cosplay panels. Panels can be considered ‘performances of self’ (Goffman, 1990) as participants enact the roles as masters and novices, and as ‘cultural performances’ (Turner and Schechner, 1988) as the events allow cosplay communities to reflexively examine the practice of cosplay and its values.

In hour-long presentations, panellists attempt to instruct and induct audiences in some
CHAPTER 3. HOW TO COSPLAY

of the key values of cosplay: accuracy, completism, spectacle, amateurism, and creativity. These values can be considered aesthetic and ethic as they outline how cosplay should look, and how it should be enacted. Panellists communicate these values not only through the verbal content of their lectures but through the use of objects, their own costumed bodies, and photographs of other cosplayers. While the costumes and performances of cosplay are remarkably varied, in panel performances presenters attempt to represent cosplay as cohesive entity. In these temporary performances cosplayers attempt to structure and fix the meanings of the practice.

Panels, as temporary assemblies of practitioners, newcomers and non–practitioners, also provide an introduction to cosplay communities. Panels introduce the social world of cosplay: a world populated by masters, newcomers, ‘serious’ and non–serious participants, performers and audiences. Panellists, as experienced or master cosplayer are exemplary practitioners, presenting exemplary cosplay practice. The embodied performances of panellists attempt to induct newcomers and outsiders in a community–specific competency, a form of cosplay ‘skilled vision’ (Grasseni, 2007). Grasseni (2007) has argued that the acquisition of community–specific forms of skilled vision can be a form of legitimate peripheral participation and an essential step towards full participation in a community. At cosplay panel events, members and newcomers to the cosplay community are temporarily assembled, key community values and competences are created, recreated and distributed to the wider convention–attending public.

Cosplay panels are performative events where participants, panellists and audiences, attempt to define what cosplay is, and how it should be practiced. Issues of what does or should define cosplay and non–cosplay, good and bad cosplay, good and bad cosplayers, and the activities, objects and competences which are considered meaningful within the practice, are all discussed within visual and verbal content of panels. Theorists of practice have argued that the meanings associated with a particular practice are continually in a process of being negotiated and defined (Giddens, 1984; Shove et al., 2012; Wenger, 1998). However, these same theorists have also argued that particular key concepts may play a role in structuring or organising all meanings associated with a particular practice. Giddens (1984, p.185) posits the existence of ‘structural principles’, deeply held beliefs and concepts that potentially shape the trajectory of practices and societies. Similarly, Wenger (1998, p.58) in his development of the community of practice concept argues that communities of practice are organised by ‘reified values’,
3.2. THE PERFORMANCE OF COSPLAY VALUES AND SKILLED VISION

'points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized'. While they perform structuring work, these particular values or concepts are themselves structured, created and recreated. According to Wenger (1998) reification is a process; values are reified through practice, performance, and the creation of material artefacts. Certain values become intrinsic to practices–as–entities through their enactment in practices–as–performances.

Theorists have emphasised the structuring role that aesthetic values can play within a community or society. Coote (1992, p.248) argues that aesthetics can be defined as a 'society’s way of seeing’ and that the induction into a shared system of visual perception and evaluation can be a means of strengthening one’s identity as a member of the community. Art sociologist Becker (1982, p.131) argues that aesthetics can be considered an ‘activity’ in that the creation and maintenance are actively and continually constructed by members of a community. While Bourdieu (1990) primarily tends to consider aesthetics as markers of underlying social, economic and class structures, within specific artistic and craft communities it could be argued that aesthetic systems can be viewed as ‘structuring structures’ which are reproduced in practice, which must be learned and physically inscribed upon the body.

Aesthetic values cannot be dismissed as trivial adjuncts to other values and beliefs as they can be deeply entwined with a community’s moral values and the production of social relationships (Overing, 1989). The connection between aesthetics and ethics has been emphasised by recent explorations of stylistic authenticity in cultures and subcultures (Thornton, 2013; Muggleton, 2000). In the concept of authenticity aesthetic styles are intimately connected with the internal dispositions of practitioners (Thornton, 2013; Muggleton, 2000). In the production of authentic performances, artefacts and styles practitioners must use the correct tools, materials and techniques in the appropriate contexts and carry out the activity with the correct attitudes and intensions.

An aesthetic way of seeing, can be considered inherently political in that it involves members of the community evaluating and ranking things whether those things are cows (Grasseni, 2007), pottery (Gowland, 2009) or handmade chocolates (Terrio, 2000). As Becker (1982) argues, aesthetic systems can be intricately linked with the allocation of power and resources of a community as those who are able to produce, own, or create things that are valued within the system have greater access to social and economic resources.
Within a community of practice aesthetic values do not exist purely as concepts; they are intimately associated with practical, embodied skills. These values and skills do not exist a priori within the community but must be recreated by existing practitioners and taught to newcomers (Shove et al., 2012; Wenger, 1998). Cosplay is a practice that is primarily concerned with the visual: the look of costumes, props, illustrations, bodies, embodied performances and photographs. For this reason, debates about the aesthetics and ethics of cosplay are often discussions of how things bodies, costumes and performances should look, how these looks should be created, and how visual things should be interpreted.

The question of how people acquire culturally specific ways of seeing, including aesthetic systems, has recently become the subject of anthropological discussion such as Grasseni’s (2007) collection Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards. Grasseni and others (Herzfeld, 2007; Gowland, 2009) explore the ways that members of different communities professional and subcultural are taught particular ways of viewing their worlds. An understanding and appreciation of a particular aesthetic system, be it cattle breeders’ definitions of bovine functional beauty (Grasseni, 2004) or performers’ shared understandings of a drag queen’s ‘divine’ qualities (Ronzon, 2007), can be considered a form of skilled vision.

Drawing on Lave and Wenger (1991), Grasseni argues that learning to see is a social activity and one which is tied to the formation of a person’s identity as a member of a community of practice. The training of skilled vision can take place in highly formalised learning environments such as lectures and classes as well as in the everyday lives and experiences of community members (Grasseni, 2007). As in the case of craft apprentices, learning may occur in the repeated exposure to the works and workshops of artisans (Gowland, 2009). Objects, ephemera, films and photography can also be used as a means of reinforcing aesthetic systems (Grasseni, 2007; Ronzon, 2007). Non–visual means such as verbalisation conversations, performances, songs, lectures and jokes, are often instrumental as the definition and classification of the seen are also expressed in words and speech (Grasseni, 2007; Ronzon, 2007; Herzfeld, 2007; Saunders, 2007). Photography, costume objects and verbal narratives are all assembled in the performances of cosplay panellists as they attempt to induct their audiences in a cosplay ‘way of seeing.’

I will explore the teaching of cosplay ‘skilled vision’ by considering panellists’ presen-
3.3  WHO TEACHES? WHO LISTENS?: ESTABLISHING AUTHORITY

Panel performances teach cosplay values and skills to audiences but they also induct and position these audiences within a community of practice. Panel events involve the temporary assembly of members of local communities of practice. Newcomers, experienced practitioners and masters alike, come together in a temporary location to articulate, (re)create and negotiate the values and skills associated with cosplay. The performance of community skills and values should be considered as a political process (Herzfeld, 2007; Saunders, 2007; Gowland, 2009). As Herzfeld (2007) points out, the transmission of knowledge including knowledge of a way of seeing is a political activity in which the knowledgeable and skilled members of a community can control newcomers’ access to information, skills and techniques. The process of learning to see occurs within the pre-existing power structures of communities and may involve the learner being positioned within a hierarchy of roles (Saunders, 2007). (Saunders, 2007) argues that the spaces in which the training of embodied practices occurs can also serve
CHAPTER 3. HOW TO COSPLAY

to reinforce the hierarchical structures of the community. The teaching of the practice
of cosplay at convention panels is intrinsically linked with an introduction to a cosplay
community of practice, its roles and hierarchies.

For many convention–goers initial awareness of cosplay panels comes from reading
convention guides and schedules. These booklets, many of which are elaborately de-
signed and brightly coloured, are handed out free to attendees at every major Australian
convention. The same information is often available to convention attendees via pdf
files displayed on the convention’s website or even downloadable as mobile phone ap-
lications. Cosplay and other panels are not only displayed on maps and timetables but
convention booklets usually include a description of the panels, outlining the content to
be presented and naming or describing the presenters.

Are you new to costume playing? Or just want some tips for your next Cos-
play outfit? Well look no further and come and visit the Cosplay Panel to
learn from some of Adelaide’s best about costuming! (AVCon 2010 Booklet)

Reading the descriptive advertisements for panels in convention booklets provides an
entry into understanding the political contexts of this performance activity, raising ques-
tions such as who has the authority to speak among the community and who actually
listens?

Several key themes emerge from this reading. Firstly, descriptions of panels usually
include explicit or implicit suggestions of the type of audience that organisers expect
to attend the panel. ‘New to costume playing’ (AVCon 2010 booklet), ‘New cosplay-
ers’ ‘Beginner class’, ‘Master Class’ (SMASH 2011 booklet). In some cases panels are
described as being appropriate for both newcomers and experienced members of the
community. In other instances, usually at larger conventions with multiple cosplay pan-
els scheduled, panels are described as being divided into those that are appropriate for
beginners and those that are suitable for those ‘ready to tackle the hard stuff’ (SMASH
2011 Booklet).

Walking into a cosplay panel at an Australian convention I was visually struck by the
diversity of the audience. Seated in the rows of metal chairs or lounging nonchalantly
against the walls were elaborately dressed cosplayers in makeup and coiffured wigs,
others dressed in simpler costumes or pieces of costume such as hats or cat–ears, others
dressed in casual clothing. As the booklet descriptions of the panels suggest, cosplay
panels are not solely for newcomers or beginners but instead a spectrum of the cosplay community of practice can be encountered at panels. Friends of the presenters shout words of encouragement or suggestive in-jokes and assist with fixing the endlessly failing laptop. Experienced cosplayers in detailed outfits are often invited by panellists to stand up and model their costumes. Then, there are others, more casual observers who may flit tourist-like into panel room for a brief period of time before leaving for other con activities. Panels are not events that solely feature interaction between a cosplay ‘master’ and a group of newcomers instead other masters, old-hands, casual-observers and newcomers mingle together in the audience providing newcomers with a form of legitimate peripheral participation in this cosplay community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Secondly, cosplay panel descriptions in convention booklets name, or describe the presenters of the panel. Language used in the booklets to describe the panellists includes terms such as ‘cosplay master’, ‘sensei’ and ‘the best’ (AVCon 2010 booklet, Manifest 2010, SMASH 2011 booklet). While these terms are self-mockingly grandiose, cosplay panel descriptions are usually written by the panellists themselves and published by the convention organising committee, they still convey the idea of the panellists as teachers with the authority to address the cosplay community. Panel performances recreate a level of stratification in the cosplay community of practice; experienced, ‘master cos-players’ are elevated above newcomers and less experienced or successful practitioners. How experienced cosplayers perform themselves as masters in other contexts will be explored further in Chapter 7.

Returning to the cosplay panel room, one can observe how the spatial arrangement of the panel room itself emphasises the idea of the panellist as teacher or lecturer. Rows of identical seating are positioned facing a space at the front of the room where a table and chair are set up for the presenter’s use. A projector displays large images of a PowerPoint presentation against a blank wall or screen. For a considerable proportion of the community who are attending or recently have attended high school or university this is a familiar scene a lecturing space. As Goffman (1981) has argued lecturing spaces are performance spaces with a clear delineation between presenter/performer and listener/audience. The lecturer is assumed to possess particular bodies of knowledge and the verbal competences to impart this knowledge to their audience (Goffman, 1981).
At the commencement of the panel, presenters will sometimes further emphasise their authority by mentioning the number of years in which they have been involved in cosplay. Occasionally, panellists will ask the audience the same question. On one occasion, the responses from some audience members of a panel indicated that they were even more experienced than presenters, a realisation that was met with nervous laughter from panellists and audience alike. The establishment of the panellists as experienced cosplay ‘masters’ is necessary, for as the following section will demonstrate, panels are sites where some of the key values of the practice of cosplay are presented, taught and debated.

3.4 Accuracy

At a cosplay panel at AVCon in Adelaide the first presenter Ben, dressed as “Prof. Severus Snape” from the Harry Potter series of films, has finally managed to get the panel room’s laptop to work. Technical difficulties are overcome and he is now able to display a projected PowerPoint slideshow. He addresses the audience, embarking on the central theme of his speech,

So essentially if you want to begin a costume, if you want to do a costume, the biggest thing to do, the best thing to do is to find pictures of the costume. I do reference sketches, lots of them, everywhere. And get pictures of every angle you can possibly get. So the front, the back, the full body, even sometimes finding details in the shoes is important and even if they have accessories if they have a weapon, a hat, something like that or a screwdriver. (Ben, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2011)

Here the presenter is discussing a topic frequently explored in cosplay panels, a topic which I will refer to as research. Members of the cosplay community frequently use the term ‘research’ to describe the process of finding images of the character that they plan to cosplay. What is implicit in the presenter’s opening words and the concept of research is the idea that cosplay practices should be focused upon the accurate recreation of the visual style of a specific character or character type originating from a pre–existing text.
In many presentations panellists emphasised the idea that cosplayers in their creation of costumes and performances should strive for ‘accuracy’. A cosplayer should seek to make their costume and/or performance reproduce an original design, text or performance as closely as possible. As I will describe below, in panel performances accuracy was primarily given to mean visual accuracy, that a cosplayer’s costume should visually mimic a pre–existing character design. While some cosplayers used the terms ‘accuracy’ or ‘authenticity’ interchangeably to describe this idea, I will refer to the concept as accuracy in order to distinguish between anthropological and sociological understandings of authenticity and this cosplay–specific understanding.

According to the cosplay concept of accuracy, a costume item or performance gains meaning only in its relation to a pre–existing design. As in Grasseni’s (2007) study of idealised forms of cattle beauty among breeders, the value of the thing, in this case a cosplay costume, depends on its visual resemblance to a pre–existing model which is then applied as a standard. Applying Gell’s (1998) concept of the art nexus, the cosplay costume or performance acts as an index for the original design as prototype. For cosplayers who are strong proponents of accuracy research is deemed to be an important element of cosplay in that it helps the cosplayer ensure that their self–created costumes and performances replicate the original character designs and texts as closely as possible.

In this emphasis on accuracy cosplay differs from other costuming communities and movements associated with the Australian convention scene such as Steampunk, a movement which emphasises the creation of original character costumes, and the costumes devised for Zombie walks which are typically original characters or subverted and “zombiefied” versions of recognisable icons and characters such as zombie “Spider–man” and zombie Jesus. As will be discussed in succeeding chapters, the concept of accuracy is an important value within the community and is discussed, debated, materialised, embodied, performed and digitised in practice.

In panels the importance of research in ensuring the accuracy of a cosplay costume is performed to the audience through both visual and verbal means. Presenters will often begin this part of the presentation by suggesting sources of images of characters such as websites, art books, videogame covers, self–created screen shots, and often will show screen captures or the actual websites on PowerPoint slides. Personal anecdotes are also used by some presenters who will tell a story of where they personally obtained
images for their costume. However, in terms of teaching the value of accuracy as a way of seeing, the most critical parts of a panellist’s discussion of research are the moments in their presentation when they instruct the audience in how to identify the ‘features’ (Goodwin, 1994) of accuracy. This often manifests in panellists verbally proposing questions to the audience which audience members are then, in turn expected to internalise when participating in cosplay activities.

And the next thing to do, particularly if you’re going to be sewing or you’re looking for something in op–shops and stuff like that is to consider the type of texture of the material the shine, the drape, transparency, the type of garment it is. Is it tight or loose fitting on the body? How easy it is to make it or source it? (Ben, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2011)

Exploring the ways that specialised forms of vision are taught and discussed in professional settings, Goodwin (1994) identifies an activity he terms ‘highlighting’ to describe how a member of a practitioner may draw attention to particular features of an image or physical thing in order to identify its most relevant aspects for an audience features that may not be noticed or appear relevant to an untrained eye.

Next looking at the fabric, the texture and the fabric type. You need to look at the grain of the fabric. Some, like a fabric called drill the grain is on an angle, [holds up dustcoat] and this one here has a very definite grain. So if you have a really good look at close up shots you get to see all these details and they can make the difference between a really, really good costume and one that looks kind of average. (Liz, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2011)

Here, in this example of panel performance the presenter is highlighting, inviting the audience to view a garment, a costume dustcoat jacket, in a very particular manner. She holds up the garment to illustrate with her hands the way that the fabric has been woven and also to demonstrate that the weave of the material matches the appearance of videogame character’s costume shown in the PowerPoint slide behind her. As a middle–class Westerner with no training in textiles and who wears exclusively manufactured garments I frequently found these moments in panels particularly illustrative of the contrast between a cosplay ‘way of seeing’ and my own. I was unaware that fabric had a grain, let alone that a cosplayer should be able to examine and draw comparisons between digital illustrations of fabric and actual, physical material.
3.4. ACCURACY

As in this example, accuracy for a cosplayer extends to minute details. In their speeches panellists emphasise that these questions that a cosplayer should internalise while attempting to choose materials should be considered very carefully. ‘What colour is the character’s garment?’ may appear to be a question with an obvious answer, however,'A blue depending on the lighting can end up looking like purple...’ ‘Also white isn’t always white. White can look grey as well.’

(Liz, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2011)

With the use of speech and visual examples panellists highlight the features that will need to be imitated or reproduced to achieve accuracy colours, textures, shapes and patterns. The panellists’ speeches imply that listening cosplayers should internalise this attention to detail when creating their own costumes.

The value of accuracy is also communicated by presenters through ‘compare and contrast’ activities where the audience is presented with images of different cosplay costumes which are the presenter then evaluates according to their apparent likeness to the pre–existing character. Returning again to the panel described at the start of the chapter, immediately before the audience were shown the images of the two different “Rock Lee” cosplayers, the presenter showed us a slide with an image of the character as depicted in the anime Naruto (Kishimoto 2002). The presenter did not tell us from where she had sourced the image but the image showed the illustrated character in full body on a white background. The presenter only briefly named the character and the series. The series is currently one of the most recognisable in contemporary anime fandom and she would have expected the audience to have some pre–existing knowledge of “Rock Lee” and the Naruto world.

As the audience seated facing the metre–high projected images in the manner of a cinema or university lecture theatre we were invited, indeed expected, to closely observe the image and the slides that would follow after. But we were not invited merely to look; the presenter continued to speak and gesturing towards the slides the presenter instructed us to focus on “details” while she explicitly pointed out the similarities and differences between the original anime character design and the two different cosplay costumes. This activity could be considered a form of ‘optical induction’ (Ronzon, 2007) where an image or environment is scanned by sight and discussed verbally, the whole effect of
the object being determined by whether it possesses the ‘correct’ features. However, in Ronzon’s (2007) original conception of ‘optical induction’ consensus as to whether the object is valued depends on a verbal consensus from participants, whereas in this case a value judgement is verbalised by the presenter and tacitly agreed by the audience.

The idea that cosplayers should strive towards ‘accurately’ recreating character designs in cosplay costumes was promoted at many of the panels I attended during fieldwork. However, as I will discuss in later chapters, within the wider cosplay community there was considerable disagreement and variation of opinion over the definition and importance of accuracy. Different panellists emphasised the importance of accuracy to different extents. Some panellists devoted considerable time to discussing how cosplayers could and should create accurate cosplays, to the extent where some panellists advocated sacrificing bodily comfort to achieve accuracy. In contrast, other panellists I observed actually challenged accuracy as the primary value of cosplay and instead emphasised alternative values.

### 3.5 Completism

Closely associated with accuracy is the aesthetic value of ‘completism’. Completism is not a word I have heard in common parlance within the cosplay community of practice. It is a term I have coined to describe another key value of the cosplay aesthetic system, the idea that cosplayers should aim to make their costume as total or ‘complete’ as possible. Within the Australian cosplay community of practice there exists an idea that an individual is not supposed to solely make and wear individual aspects of a character’s costume a perfectly recreated version of a character’s hat or a spectacular prop those parts of the costume are supposed to add to the visual effect of the whole costume. The cosplayer should be costumed from head to toe. This idea of cosplay completism is rarely explicitly stated in the verbalisations of the presenters of cosplay panels but is instead stated visually and implied in the content of presentations.

The only cosplay panel I attended during my fieldwork activities where a presenter was not actually dressed in cosplay was a cosplay photography panel (cosplay photographers being an important subgroup of the community for whom being in costume was not necessary to their legitimate participation see Chapter 8). At all of the other cosplay
panels I attended the presenters were costumed, usually from be–wigged head to booted or stilletoed toes. Standing or sitting at the front of the panel room or sometimes walking amongst the audience’s rows of seating, the panellists made their fully costumed–bodies highly visible to the audience.

Sometimes if the wearing of the panellist’s complete costume would make it impossible for him or her to make eye contact with the audience or speak if the panellist was wearing a suit of armour, for example the panellist would remove the mask. Interestingly, in instances where it was the case that a panellist was not continually displaying all of their costume on their bodies the missing components were often displayed elsewhere in the presentation. Oversized prop weapons would rest against the panellist’s table or even be passed among the audience, allowing them to closely inspect and touch the items. Masks would be donned at the request of photographers at the beginning or ending of a panel. In some particular cases the revelation of a ‘missing’ cosplay component could be worked into the main content of the presentation:

A quick example which I haven’t really thought out since I’ve been upgrading this costume is that yes, I have a wand [with a theatrical flourish brandishes wand from inside his cloak]. It’s not always out [laughter from audience]. Only for certain occasions [laughter from audience].

(Ben, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2011)

With a highly conscious performative gesture and verbal joking innuendo, the panellist dressed as wizard character Prof. Snape displays a prop wand that was previously concealed from the audience. Drawing the audience’s attention to this small prop in the most overt manner, the panellist began to lecture the audience on the importance of including props and accessories as part of a cosplay costume. During the course of my fieldwork activities in panels I never heard any explicit verbal statements from panellists to the effect that a person who created only a dress or a sword and wore them to a convention would be engaging in poor or even non–cosplay. However, panellists regularly expressed statements that apparently secondary articles such as wigs, shoes, props and
make-up would enhance or indeed complete a cosplay:

   The final thing for finishing off a costume and sometimes what makes it, is
   your props and your accessories. You would have seen today and you will
   see in a moment some of the things that really help your costume and bring
   it to life.                        (Ben, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2011)

Introductory panels I attended would often devote a substantial proportion of presenta-

tion to aspects such as wigs, makeup and props. Being involved in dance and perfor-

mance in my teenage years I had some familiarity with theatrical costumes and make–up

but I was quite surprised by the cosplay panellists’ strong endorsement of the need to

wear wigs. Wigs, as I personally discovered later during my own cosplay experiences,

are hot, heavy and tend to cause headaches. Nevertheless panellists frequently espoused

the idea of the wig as an important, completing element of cosplay.

   Wearing a wig will reinforce the idea that you are wearing a costume rather
   than just wearing some weird clothes.                                     (Presenter, Wai–Con Cosplay Panel Author’s Fieldnotes 2011)

Even the panellists at SMASH’s 2010 ‘Cosplay for Poor Students’ argued that it was

worth spending a considerable amount of money (starting price seventy dollars) on a

‘quality’ wig, especially the purchase of a heat resistant wig to allow for styling with

hair–curling and straightening tongs.

The necessary inclusion of props, makeup and wigs for the creation of a complete cos-

play effect was sometimes further emphasised by panellists’ use of costumed audience

members as models of this effect. During one panel, midway through a speech on the

techniques of wig styling a panellist asked a cosplayer dressed as the titular character

from the anime Yu–Gi–Oh (Toei 1998) how many different hair pieces her wig was con-

structed from. The cosplayer who was seated towards the front of the room then stood

up, allowing the rest of the audience to see her full body which was costumed from her

very high and colourful wig, to necklaces, clothes and shoes. She replied that she had

used one wig as a base and then had attached other pieces using glue and that the whole

thing was styled using glue and hairspray. Her hairpiece was praised by the panellists

as an example of effective styling. While the panellists’ verbalisations highlighted the

participant’s wig as a feature, as the cosplayer displayed her entire costumed body to

the rest of the audience the effect was that of an entire “Yu–Gi–Oh” costume, not just
3.6. SPECTACLE

an elaborate wig.

While the aesthetic value of cosplay completism appeared to be universally accepted and implied in the costumes, speeches and performances of panellists at all the cosplay panels I attended during fieldwork, within the panel room there were those whose dress contradicted this value of completism. As previously mentioned among the audiences of many panels I attended there would be audience members dressed primarily in casual clothes with maybe one or two pieces of costuming—cat ears, fox tails, a character’s hat, a prop sword purchased from a trader’s hall. This kind of costume activity was seldom discussed during cosplay panels, excepting one casual remark made by an Adelaide panellist about another cosplayer, marvelling that ‘last year she painted her face as “Hello Kitty” and this year she’s in the Madman National Heat’, (a major Australian cosplay competition requiring full costume, props and the performance of a skit). In the panellists comment was the implication that the cosplayer had progressed from a less serious form of costuming, face–painting, to a more complete and serious form of costuming.

The prominence of the idea of completism within the community influenced my own costume choices. At the very first cosplay panel I attended at AVCon in 2010, I wore a purchased character hat and casual clothes. In other contexts of the convention attendees had made positive comments about my hat. In the cosplay panel listening to speeches given by cosplayers in full–body uniforms and armour, viewing photographs of cosplayers in full costume and touching the home–made silicon ear of a “Spock” cosplayer I began to feel self–conscious about my hat. I felt definitely at that moment that I was not cosplaying. Attending all subsequent panels I dressed either in casual clothes, or full cosplay. As became a more active participant in the community my costumes became more and more ‘complete.’

3.6 Spectacle

The concept of spectacle—the idea that cosplay is performed for an audience to elicit a particular response—is also communicated in cosplay panels. In their speeches panellists continually discuss the look of things, designs, fabrics, paints, and how these items will appear to those viewing the costumes: will a cheap wig look too shiny? In these
Figure 3.1: “Delphox” (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)
3.6. SPECTACLE

comments there is always the assumption of an audience for the cosplay. Panellists will remind audiences that their costumes will probably be photographed and that they should prepare for performing their costumes to audiences.

Practise stances that not only show off your costume for photographers but give them a sense of the characters you are portraying.

(Cassandra, ACG Panel Transcript 2012)

The idea that cosplay is performed for an audience is also emphasised by the types of cosplay costumes celebrated in panels, costumes that will appear exciting, attractive or recognisable to audiences. Cosplay costumes may take many forms and styles depending on their source material, from simple school uniforms to elaborate ball gowns or suits of armour. However, in cosplay panels certain kinds of costumes tended to be promoted over others. At most panels I attended panellists themselves were wearing spectacular costumes that is to say costumes that appear designed to dazzle the viewer and impress them with the power of the wearer, costumes appearing to be made of rich velvets and silks, lace, fur, leather, metallic, glass and reflective (as an informant put it, ‘shiny’) elements.

The opulent appearance of these costumes is usually reflective of the original character design the cosplayer has chosen to portray, the prototype (Gell, 1998). These opulent costumes are the clothing of royal, priestly or soldierly characters in the source material. Interestingly, the source anime/manga/videogames are frequently themselves referencing earlier prototypes and various cross-cultural aesthetic systems. The opulence of the eighteenth-century Versailles court is translated into the opulence of the character design of “Marie Antoinette” from the anime The Rose of Versailles (1972), and then again by the cosplayer creating a “Marie Antoinette” costume in 2012.

At the ACG Costuming Panel at AVCon in 2012 two of the presenters were dressed in prize-winning costumes: one in hand-created “Cyberman” armour from Doctor Who and the other in a brightly coloured “Lady Loki” costume from Marvel’s Thor comics which featured an elaborate helmet with golden curving horns.

Even panellists who wore relatively simple costumes when delivering their presentations displayed images of spectacular costumes. The presenter of a leatherworking panel at SMASH in 2012, for example, wore a simple but striking handmade leather jacket as part of his cosplay but his presentation included photographs of elaborate body
armour that he had worn when competing in the Madman National Championship Finals. Pieces of the armour were even made available for audience members to touch and examine.

In their narratives panellists would also emphasise the importance of a costume appearing visually appealing to audiences, even if the costume is physically uncomfortable to wear or contains flaws that are visible only to the cosplayer. At AVCon’s 2010 Cosplay Panel, Jenita, an experienced cosplayer, commented on the maid outfit that she was wearing. She explained that her garments were not sewn but put together with hot glue so the insides of the garments looked messy and unprofessional. To us members of the audience the garments looked flawless with no visible evidence of the garments’ unorthodox construction. She suggested to the audience that this is the case with many costumes worn in competitions; they appear spectacular from the auditorium but are held together with glue or gaffer tape. She further argued that knowing how to take short cuts in construction without compromising the outward visual appearance of a costume is a hallmark of an experienced cosplayer.
3.7. AMATEURISM

Jenita’s view characterises cosplay as a performance. Cosplays are assembled and worn by cosplayers but they are not created for the cosplayer alone. As a performance practice cosplay necessarily involves interactions between cosplayers as actors and spectators other cosplayers, audiences and photographers present or imagined. The cosplayer will be observed and evaluated by other participants in the community. Cosplay, according to this view, is something performed for others. This understanding of cosplay contrasts with another value of the cosplay aesthetic system, the value of amateurism in which cosplay practices are viewed primarily as acts of self–expression and personal affiliation.

3.7 Amateurism

‘Cosplay is love!’ a panellist exclaimed during AVCon’s 2010 Cosplay Panel. The term amateur that describes a person who performs work activities on a part time, unpaid basis that would be typically undertaken by a paid worker is derived from the Latin amator the lover (Stebbins, 1992). Within the contexts of convention panels and within the cosplay community of practice more broadly, a concept of amateurism that depicts love as the most important and pure motivation for the practice is regularly promoted. Although it could be argued that there are no professional cosplayers, cosplayers regularly compare their efforts with professional costumers stage, film and television, prosthetics artists, hair stylists and dressmakers. Within the convention community there also exist for–profit businesses, usually operating online, that create anime, manga and videogame character costumes for customers to purchase (for example cosplaymagic.com). Eitzen (1989), examining the world of sports, identified within the athletics community an ideology of amateurism as the purest form of participation in that sport. Paid professionals were deemed to be tainted by materialist drives in contrast to the amateurs who were seen to be participating solely out of love (Eitzen, 1989). A similar ideology can be identified within the Australian cosplay community, particularly during panels where purchased, professionally made costumes are barely discussed and self–created costumes occupy the bulk of the discussion time.

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1 This is debatable as there exist a tiny minority of international cosplayers whose cosplay activities are used to promote particular companies and brands.
Within cosplay panel contexts self-created costumes are often described as being objects of greater quality and value than professionally made costumes:

Be careful of online cosplay shops as well because sometimes they take shortcuts when making their costumes to save on costs and manufacturing time so they’re not always accurate. (Liz, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2011)

Referring to the aforementioned value of accuracy, the presenter outlines the limitations imposed upon professionals that inhibit them from creating a costume that would be considered a high quality cosplay within the community.

Unlike professional costumers who work to fulfil a brief, cosplayers are portrayed as being motivated by “purer” desires. In panels, cosplay is presented as a practice that should be enacted out of love; love for particular characters or texts, or the love of practicing assembly and performance activities. Sometimes panellists would explain to the audience their own personal motivations for creating particular cosplays. Often panellists would depict their character choices as being motivated by a deep affiliation with a particular character or text:

I admit that I was influenced in this costume by the Thor movie but the other reason that I wanted to do it, other than the fact that it’s just an amazing costume, visually is that I find the character of Loki fascinating, be it Loki from the comics, movies or even the original mythology. (Cassandra, ACG Panel Transcript 2012)

An idea that cosplay costumes should be motivated by feelings of personal identification and affiliation has been identified in cosplay communities of practice in Japan, China and the United States (Lunning, 2011; Rahman et al., 2012; Peirson-Smith, 2013).

However, within cosplay panels in Australia love of a particular character or text was not portrayed as the only acceptable motivation for character choice. Sometimes panellists would relate that their character choice was not motivated by personal affiliation with a character but instead by their love of a particular craft technique. SMASH panellist Wakaleo revealed that he based his costuming choices around character designs that would enable him to use his favoured technique, leather working.

As I will demonstrate further in subsequent chapters, this personal identification extends beyond character choice and into costume assembly and performance activities.
To create good cosplay a practitioner must put themselves into the costume, their effort, time, money and dedication. Ethnographers of material culture have argued that individuals have a close relationship with items which they have created themselves (Hoskins, 1998; Malkogeorgou, 2011). Cosplay costumes are assembled through ongoing ‘processes of objectification’ (Miller, 1987) through which cosplayers create close personalised relationships with their self-assembled objects. These objectification processes are performed to panel audiences in panellists’ construction narratives.

The visual and verbal narration of the creation of cosplay items reveals to the audience the amount of time and effort the cosplayer has put into the creation of the costume. Slides displaying photographs of different components of a single prop, at different stages of the construction process emphasise the number and types of techniques used, the skills the cosplayer had to acquire. As a newcomer to the cosplay community of practice I found myself continually astounded by the number of hours spent on details, months spent on single costumes. Here, in the context of panellists’ discussions about their processes the idea of the amateur—the lover of cosplay—again becomes relevant. The audience can now perceive the cosplay costume as an object produced as a labour of love.

In these narratives ideas of amateurism are fused with cosplayers’ particular understanding of creativity. As an amateur costumer a cosplayer does not necessarily have access to the same resources as a professional. Through necessity cosplayers do not always use the same tools, materials, or techniques as a professional costumer. Panellists’ discussion and celebration of cosplayers’ transformation of unlikely ‘junk’ objects into spectacular costume items reveals a particular cosplay notion of creativity. In the panellists’ narratives cosplay assembly processes are portrayed not as straightforward mimicry but instead involve recreation and remixing as cosplayers transform unusual artefacts.
3.8 Creativity

We are quite good recyclers at the Australian Costumer’s Guild using bits of what people call junk and we’ll always take a piece of junk and turn it into something really cool. And your options never end. A lot of us actually, when it’s hard rubbish day, we tend to go scouring up and down the street, looking around and seeing what people are throwing out and going, ‘how can I use that?’”

(Ben, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2011)

In a tone of considerable pride, the presenter from the Australian Costumer’s Guild announces to the audience that he sources his materials not from high-end craft stores but from household refuse. This announcement provokes laughter from some members of the audience. Self-deprecating humour is also used by the panellist in the following example,

There’s quite a lot of random stuff you can use from everywhere the carpet. I’ve used the carpet before for the sword handle because it was exactly the right colour and texture. I’ve ripped something out of a pool table [laughter] because of all the velvet it was all nice and stuff. But don’t do that...[laughter] (Wirru, Wai-Con Prop Panel Author’s Transcript 2010)

In both cases the laughter from the audience, and in the panellist’s cautionary final words in the second example, suggest that salvaging rubbish and household items is not considered ‘normal’ behaviour in Australian society. However, the tone of enthusiasm and the pleasure in this activity communicated in both the panellists’ voices suggested that these anecdotes are far from confessions of shame but can perhaps be considered to be boasts of competence in a particular visual skill the ability to see the creative cosplay potential in mundane objects. In the cosplay activity of transforming junk, the materials and equipment of the professional are replaced by the objects of the amateur’s everyday material world.

In his study of zisha potters in the Jiangsu province of China, Gowland (2009) argues that in order for outsiders to appreciate the aesthetic value of handcrafted pottery artisans had to invite potential customers into their workspaces and show and narrate the processes involved in the creation of the items. In a similar manner I will argue that in order to demonstrate their skill in perceiving the value of ‘junk’ objects cosplay panellists nar-
rate stories of how they created spectacular costume items out of unlikely materials. At a cosplay panel in Perth the panellist is recounting to the audience how he created his ‘Final Fantasy 13 Noctis engine sword thing’ a large and highly detailed prop weapon. Gesturing with his hand, he draws the audience’s attention to the projected slide behind him. It is covered with digital photographs of objects in various states of transformation half painted, cut up, sanded.

The two toilet pipes I’m talking about! The big pipe and the small pipe they’re for one engine and there’s the Lipton Iced bottle and there’s a sink strainer there. Then these bits were all made out of craft foam. That was DAS air dry clay. And just a mixture of everything in that you get the sword!

Observing the photographs displayed on the slides in conjunction with the panellist’s narration, the audience perceives how the tea bottle, the plumbing pipes and the sink strainer were incorporated into the prop. Unrecognisable in photographs of the finished props, these everyday objects have been brought back into the visual awareness of the audience by the panellist’s highlighting narrative. We in the audience now view the prop both as whole finished article but also as a constructed object created from unusual materials. Rather in the manner of a magician revealing a trick the panellist is demonstrating his creative and technical skills in explaining how he was able to create this visual illusion. In this panel and others the panellist did not only demonstrate their own skills but suggested that audience members may also develop the ability to see the cosplay potential in everyday things.

...So the point is just look at the things around you and maybe you can rip something off [laughter] (Wirru, Wai–Con Prop Panel Author’s Transcript 2010)

Listening to these narratives in panels I often felt a sense of excitement, imagining what creations I too could achieve. Self–created cosplay costumes could equal or rival the quality of professionally created costumes. A cosplayer could make anything out of anything. However, while audiences were actively encouraged to participate in the activity of costume creation, to do–it–yourself (as Coy (1989) points out, newcomers are essential for the continuation of the community), panellists were also often quick to forewarn newcomers that the transformation of a person from newcomer to master would not be immediate. In their speeches panellists would often imply that some costumes
should not be attempted by novices:

And the big thing is, you might like a costume but initially, for your first one you might want to think, is this something I can achieve right now?

(Ben, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2011)

Highly detailed costumes and those requiring difficult to master techniques were seen as particularly problematic:

And it’s always a good idea to start easy and then start something more difficult. Because if you start on a really difficult one and get frustrated it’s easy to give up. You need to start with something that’s more your level. Don’t start off with something really, really complicated like what Amy’s wearing [gestures to Amy who is wearing a Yuna FFX costume. She later took part in the Madman National Round] because there’s an awful lot of different materials in there, different techniques, dyeing, all sorts of things like that.

(Liz, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2011)

Here, the panellist also describes the internal feelings that she personally experiences and she imagines the audience will experience when failing to create a ‘good’ cosplay. A true cosplayer will feel upset, ‘de–motivated’ and ‘frustrated’ by their inability to create a wearable, accurate or spectacular cosplay. A cosplayer who does not personally care if their costume is of poor quality is not an amateur. Panellists often remark that learning skills such as dyeing can take time, practice and trial and error. As in the case of many craft communities of practice (Singleton, 1998; Herzfeld, 2004) mastery of cosplay is viewed as something that must be achieved through study, dedication, and repetition the learner progressing from the simple to the complex. By taking time to properly master cosplay techniques the cosplayer demonstrates their love of the costume, instead of creating an outfit that looks “amateurish” (in the pejorative sense).

3.9 Conclusion: Cosplay Values and Aesthetics

At the end of forty–five minutes or an hour the panel ends. Audience members move onto their next convention activity or mill about talking to panellists, asking questions and photographing their costumes. Convention volunteers begin setting–up desks
3.9. **CONCLUSION: COSPLAY VALUES AND AESTHETICS**

and cables for the room’s next panel. This panel event has finished, nearly. If it has been recorded by audience members, convention organisers or the panellists themselves it may later appear in some digital form online to be accessed again by other audiences.

What do hour–long convention panel events achieve? What do its participants take away with them when they step outside into the corridor? For audience members the cosplay panel provides them with an opportunity to participate on the peripheries of the practice but does not make them into cosplayers.

Cosplay panels do, however, provide audience members with the opportunity to enter into a community of practice. During panel presentations organisations such as the Australian Costumers’ Guild do offer explicit invitations for newcomers to join. On a subtler level panels provide newcomers with a range of names and faces associated with cosplay, both panellists and audience members. I later encountered cosplayers I had met or watched at cosplay panels at other cosplay events in my local region of Adelaide. After attending panels at conventions interstate I would later see the panellists perform onstage in competition, in photographs, videos and in online tutorials. Later in my fieldwork period some of my informants attended panels specifically to support their friends who were presenting.

For those already participating or seriously considering participation panels also provide audience members with a wealth of potential resources: tutorial websites, online and offline shopping places, and an introduction to potential cosplay materials. Particularly in more advanced panels targeted at experienced cosplayers, current practitioners often have the opportunity to ask questions of the panellists and obtain help with current projects. Experienced cosplayers publically ask detailed or specific questions that would occur only to those who had embarked on their own cosplay projects:

Audience Member (female): Can somebody tell me how to use interfacing?

Audience Member (female): How do you cut a fringe?

(SMASH Cosplay Panel Author’s Transcript 2012)

The panellists give responses to these questions and in this manner panellists and audience members mutually recognise (Wenger, 1998) each other as practitioners.
Through presenting panels experienced cosplayers present and perform themselves as experienced and knowledgeable practitioners to wider audiences. Panellists may also present out of a desire to promote cosplay and strengthen the cosplay community. In interview Jenita, an experienced cosplayer, described experiencing stage fright when presenting panels but said that cosplayers need to assist each other and that she wanted to encourage cosplayers to develop their skills.

Cosplay panels provide a fleeting introduction to the participants in the community but they also provide an introduction to the values and meanings of cosplay as a practice: accuracy, completism, spectacle, amateurism and creativity. Panels are events where panellists and audiences attempt to define the values and frameworks that shape cosplay practices and render them meaningful; these values are performed and reified (Wenger, 1998).

Agreement over what constitutes cosplay and how it should be practiced, however, is far from completely uniform across the cosplay community of practice. Some of the values discussed by panellists seem to contain inherent contradictions. Panellists’ promotion of accuracy and the idea that cosplay is performed for audiences including other cosplayers and photographers, sits uneasily alongside the idea of cosplay as a form of self–expression. Within panel performances cosplay activities are promoted simultaneously as ‘fun’ and requiring considerable work–like effort and serious dedication on the part of participants. How cosplayers, as groups and individuals, negotiate these tensions in practice throughout a range of cosplay activities will be the focus of the following chapters.

Values such as accuracy, completism, spectacle, amateurism and creativity may be taught and discussed in cosplay panels, but audiences may choose to accept or reject these ideas once they step out of the panel room. As the following chapters will explore, the way that these ideas are truly experienced, rendered relevant and meaningful, and in some cases inscribed upon the body are through participation in practice. The next chapter will explore how cosplayers engage with and negotiate these values in an embodied and material sense through the assembly of cosplay costumes.
Chapter 4

(re)Creating the Costume; (re)Creating the Cosplayer

My first ‘serious’ cosplay was “Kusuri–uri” (the Medicine Seller) from the Toei animation series *Mononoke* (2007). I use the word serious as it was the first of my costumes to require more than several weeks’ work and included many components that I had constructed myself. My cosplay of this strange, male, vaguely non–human, exorcist character with his brightly patterned female–style kimono and his demon–headed sword took me about six months to construct and cost me in total over two hundred dollars. In the course of construction I learnt details of the styles and creation of traditional Japanese clothing, beading techniques, how to use a sewing machine, where to order wigs online, and how to see ‘cosplay potential’ in everyday items. The hours I spent, the myriad skills I acquired, and the knowledge base I developed were for the express purpose of ‘accurately’ recreating the visual appearance of an animated male character in the form of costume wearable by my physical, female body. I would end up later wearing it to conventions, competitions and a photo shoot.

Looking at its component parts, which are stored in various locations in my bedroom, I feel a genuine sense of affection for this collection of objects and memories of the creation processes flood swiftly back. My Facebook profile picture, which can be seen by members of the cosplay community and my fellow postgraduate students alike, is at the time of writing, a photograph of myself wearing that particular costume though I have made and worn many subsequent costumes since. In a way, I made it and it made
CHAPTER 4. (RE)CREATING

Figure 4.1: “Kusuri–uri” (Photograph by Corey Newcombe)
The image of the cosplayer that is typically represented in photographs online or in traditional media is the cosplayer wearing the costume. I will consider wearing costumes as a related activity to be discussed at length in the following chapter. This chapter however, focuses on the more ‘everyday’ practice of cosplay assembly. Cosplay assembly is essential backstage work which occupies cosplayers for the most part of the calendar year. Between events cosplayers will be working on assembling outfits for the next upcoming occasion. While previous studies of cosplay tend to focus on the performative aspects of the practice and neglect craft and assembly activities, in this chapter I will demonstrate the fundamental role that costume assembly activities play in the recreation of cosplay as a practice.

Although cosplayers will often describe how they ‘made’ their costumes, or refer to the cosplay they are currently ‘making’, I refer to the activity as assembling the cosplay. The idea that outfit creation involves the assembly and negotiation of various elements is a theme of some dress literature (Woodward, 2005; Hansen, 2005). Woodward (2005, p.21) has argued that dressing can be considered an act of ‘assemblage’ as individuals put together different items in order to create an aesthetic whole. Similarly, in her study of outfit construction in Zambia, Hansen (2005) notes that the creation of a complete look involves the drawing together of materials, competences and values. Cosplay assemblage often extends further than many dressing activities as cosplayers often choose to assemble their outfits from raw materials. Cosplay outfits can be constructed in a myriad of ways: sewing, building, reworking premade materials. Competitors in a Madman Championship final, for example, will have each used different combinations of skills and materials: some sew, some glue, some use leatherworking techniques and some use moulding and casting methods. However, there is a unifying factor in all instances of cosplay construction in that to a greater or lesser extent all cosplays are comprised of a number of assembled parts. Cosplay costumes are assemblages. They involve the cosplayer ‘putting together’ different parts and transforming them into a unified visual look. This process is evident in the ways that cosplayers work with both visual texts and physical materials.

Why ‘assemblage’ and not ‘bricolage’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Hebdige, 1979)? Firstly, by using the term ‘assemblage’ I am attempting to distance the assembly practices of cosplayers from the processes described by Levi–Strauss and Hebdige in their more
metaphorical use of the term bricolage. As I will argue further in this chapter, cosplayers do not so much ‘borrow’ or invert the meanings of things, in the manner of the punk subculture described by Hebdige (1979), but rather divest objects of their ‘everyday’ meanings and reinvest them with ‘cosplay’ meanings.

Secondly, Lévi-Strauss’s (1966) metaphorical use of the term implies that the bricoleur draws upon a restricted range of concepts in order to respond to new phenomena. The implications of a bounded set of concepts and techniques do not apply well to cosplay’s fluidity and dynamism. In the assembly of cosplay costumes cosplayers do not draw upon a limited range of knowledges and techniques but instead scour the globalised, digitised world for appropriate objects and skills. I regularly ordered wigs from Hong Kong and fellow cosplayer Santhosh even received construction suggestions from cosplayers in Canada. It is the ability to discover, select and use new materials or technique which is perceived as a hallmark of the skilled cosplayer and another aspect of creativity in the assembly process.

The creation of cosplay costume objects involves the assembly of materials and techniques but also the assembly of practitioners and communities. Drawing upon Miller’s (1987) interpretation of Hegel’s ‘objectification’, I will argue that as they attempt to assemble costume objects cosplay practitioners also create themselves as cosplayers, gain skills, build relationships and identities, and negotiate their relationship with a community of practice. At first glance cosplay assembly may appear to be a straightforward process in which the cosplayer simply recreates a pre–existing design. Cosplay costumes appear to be like Baudrillard and Glaser’s (1994) ‘simulacra’ copies without originals, lacking in creativity, merely another mechanical reproduction of globalised, franchised imagery. However, closer examination reveals cosplay assembly processes to be highly complex, involving the manipulation of images, objects and tools, and requiring practitioners to make ongoing creative choices. The reproduction practices associated with cosplay assembly are not alienating in Marx et al.’s (1976) sense, but rather involve the close association of practitioners, materials and communities. Cosplay costumes are highly personalised, ‘inalienable’ objects in the sense of Weiner (1992).

This discussion of objectification and creativity in assembly processes is grounded and inspired by conversations regarding the nature and importance of cosplay assembly encountered in the field. Costume assembly is a popular topic of discussion in online cosplay forums, on Facebook, in cosplay magazines, in blogs and interviews and in
conversations among cosplayers. Throughout fieldwork the questions, ‘Can you describe how you made your costume?’ or ‘How did you make/do the ...?’ nearly always prompted ready and detailed responses. The narratives of cosplay construction are often highly performative particularly within contexts such as cosplay competition interviews (which will be discussed in depth in Chapter 7). The data for this chapter is drawn from all the aforementioned sources of cosplay assembly narratives as well as from my own experiences of participating in cosplay assembly, creating my own cosplay costumes (over ten so far) or assisting in the assembly of other cosplayers’ costumes.

### 4.1 Copying, Creation and Creativity

Ostensibly the practice of cosplay assembly is centred upon the action of copying as cosplayers recreate pre-existing character designs as material, wearable costumes (Truong, 2013). To outsiders, the time, effort and money spent on the assembling of cosplay outfits can sometimes appear strange or even ridiculous. Daniel was a non–cosplayer who became a novice cosplayer during the course of my fieldwork. He attended his first convention, AVCon 2012, with me and a number of cosplaying friends. We were walking through the videogames area where a panel on cosplay construction given by the Australian Costumers’ Guild was being streamed onto a projection screen. The presenter was describing the vacuum forming technique which is used to create sophisticated, detailed armour parts for costumes. Daniel turned to me and said,

> Oh yeah, I’m just going to vacuum–hydro–tetro form myself some armour!

> These people put all this time and money into these things, for what? They can’t even wear them around every day. (Author’s Fieldnotes 2012)

These comments expressed the idea that the efforts and skills of the cosplayer are essentially meaningless. Their energies are misdirected towards an activity that creates an ephemeral object, which can serve no purpose in everyday contexts, can bring no financial reward or recognition within the wider community. This attitude is sometimes reinforced by the popular media such as the commercial television program, The Project, which has presented stories on cosplay events which ridicule cosplayers as misguided social outcasts misdirecting their time and effort towards the trivial celebration of popular culture.
Cosplay construction, like many other fan practices, has been derided in portrayals by the Western media due to the activity’s perceived lack of ‘creativity’ or ‘originality’, for further examples see (Jenkins, 1992). Cosplay, like other forms of fan art, involves the incorporation of existing characters, images and stories. Cultural theorists of fan consumption have deconstructed the idea of fan practices as being creatively bankrupt through describing the variations that are achieved through the recombination of different elements from the original texts; Jenkins (1992) terms this, ‘textual poaching’ after de Certeau (1984). de Certeau’s (1984) idea of the consumer as a ‘poacher’ portrays these acts as tactics of agency and resistance to the dominance of the producer. Jenkins’s approach can also be linked to broader notions of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980), the use of one text in the creation of another.

The discussion of the creativity of fan practices forms part of a wider ongoing conversation concerning reproduction and creativity in sociological and anthropological theory. Notions of copying and creativity in these disciplines have been heavily influenced by Western philosophical traditions. Within these traditions the concept of the copy is dependent upon the idea of the existence of an original, a work created by an author or authors and which is deemed either entirely innovative or to represent a significant variation in pre–existing conventions (Clarence–Smith, 2008). After the development of the concept of the sole author throughout the Enlightenment and into the Romantic Movement, anxieties about copying and originality in Western Art worlds were further exacerbated by the rise of mechanisation and mass (re)production during the Industrial Revolution (Toby, 2008). The fear that the ideal of the individual craftsperson, the small scale workshop and the handcrafted work would be destroyed by mass production gave rise to such responses as the reactionary Arts and Crafts Movement and Marx et al.’s (1976) notion of the alienation of the worker from the act of production. Fordism and the beginnings of the Information Revolution in the twentieth–century were to promote these fears even further.

Ethnographic explorations of art and craft creation in non–Western traditions provide challenges to the Western art tradition view of the copy/original dichotomy. Recent material culture approaches have explored copying by analysing both product and processes of production, in both physical art/craft forms and performance media such as calligraphy (Carpenter, 2008; Nakamura, 2007), ritual dance (Averbuch, 2008) and visual patterns (Mall, 2007). The purposes and meanings of copying practices can vary
4.1. COPYING, CREATION AND CREATIVITY

widely depending on context. Copying in certain craft forms may serve to re–enact the
power and processes of a particular ritual (Averbuch, 2008; Law, 2008). In other con-
texts copying is seen as a learning technique to discipline both the body and the mind
of novice and bring about proper understanding of the art or craft form (Nakamura,
2007). Mimicry with variation is an essential element of many satirical or parody forms
(Toby, 2008). Copies may even exert a form of agency over those who encounter them,
dazzling subjects with the technical brilliance of their mimicry (Gell, 1996). Acts of
copying and recreation may require practitioners to negotiate traditions with personal in-
novations (Hughes-Freeland, 2007; Olesen, 2009). Cross–cultural anthropologies have
revealed that copying is not a straightforward act of reproduction but instead involves
creative choices, innovations and negotiations.

Cosplay copying activities may also be considered ‘creative’ in an alternative sense. In
Miller’s (1987) reworking of Hegel’s ‘objectification’ relationships between people and
material things are portrayed as co–creative as it is through interactions with the exter-
nal world that individuals come to create a sense of self. Objectifications can therefore
be viewed as intrinsically ‘creative’ processes. While Miller’s application of the ob-
jectification concept has been primarily applied to the consumption of material goods,
see for example (Miller, 1998, 2001a,b), recent anthropological approaches studying
the production of artefacts have also emphasised this co–creative aspect (Olesen, 2009;
Rice, 2010; Malkogeorgou, 2011). Through interacting with objects practitioners cre-
ate identities, biographies and relationships with others (Rice, 2010; Malkogeorgou,
2011).

While Miller’s (1987) model of objectification processes primarily focuses on the rela-
tionship between artefacts and individuals, the assembly process of cosplay costumes
involves the continual interrelation of artefacts, individuals and the wider cosplay com-
community. Recent material culture studies of craft production have emphasised its social
nature and emphasised that artefacts are produced through the negotiation of traditions
and community aesthetics (Giuffre, 2009; Olesen, 2009; Malkogeorgou, 2011). As cos-
players involved in assembly processes must continually negotiate between often con-
flicting community values and their own desires and competences, the recreation of
costume objects can also be viewed as a recreation of cosplay communities and their
values.
Wenger (1998) has argued that even activities conducted in isolation can be considered social activities as they are rendered meaningful through the individual’s imagined interactions with absent audiences and other practitioners. The practitioner does not, in fact, work alone but instead works within the social contexts of traditions, established techniques and rules which are learnt from others (Dobres, 2001, p.53). The cosplayer hunched over their sewing machine in the private space of their lounge room is still engaged in a social activity. Cosplay assembly is both an act of self-creation by the cosplayer and a participation in a community practice. The desires of the practitioner must be weighed against the (imagined) requirements of a potential audience. Many of these negotiations are centred upon the community value of ‘accuracy’ and the practitioners’ ability to produce a visually accurate material representation of a pre-existing image. Drawing on recent ethnographic literature on material culture, craft and performance, I argue that the production of creative works always involves the negotiation of self in relation to multiple others and/or established traditions. In this way processes of objectification do not only create practitioners but also practices and communities of practice.

4.2 Stages of the Assembly Process

Cosplayers describe the assembly process in many different ways. At the Cosplay Sewing panel held at SMASH 2012 the presenters suggested that most cosplayers like to imagine their processes in a linear fashion. This linear idea of cosplay process begins with the activity of finding reference materials, moves onto activities such as garment construction and wig-styling and ends with the existence of a wearable cosplay. However, as the presenters then argued, the reality of the cosplay assembly process could actually be conceived as a non-linear process with activities stopping and starting research activities and shoe fashioning occurring simultaneously. The presenters stated that the purpose of their panel was to help cosplayers bring their activities in line with a more structured ordering of activities to enable them to complete their costumes by the cosplayers’ chosen deadlines.

The presenters’ discussion serves to illustrate that in contrast to other, more traditional, craft forms the processes of cosplay construction can be a lot more fluid and unfixed. A
4.2. STAGES OF THE ASSEMBLY PROCESS

cosplayer does not have to start by assembling the body garments, moving onto props and shoes and ending with wig styling. This apparent lack of a fixed set of steps, an order of processes, is also portrayed as a cause of anxiety to the cosplayer and a potential hindrance to the construction of the costume.

However, observations from my fieldwork indicate that no matter which different materials and techniques cosplayers use to put together costumes, all cosplay assembly practices share similarities in that they all appear to all involve distinct activities or stages in the process: choosing the character, research, collecting, mess and testing. Before the assembly process can commence cosplayers must first decide upon a character to perform, a decision that can require considerable thought and negotiation. Research can be described as the activity of searching for reference images and texts for the purpose of creating a complete mental model of the chosen character’s visual look; collecting is the gathering of physical materials and craft competences which will be used in the creation of the cosplay; mess describes the activity whereby the material objects chosen are broken down, shaped and transformed through the skills of the cosplayer; and testing is the final activity where cosplayers compare their created physical costume to their model of the character. While putting together their cosplays, all cosplayers will engage in each activity to a greater or lesser extent. Each activity may be performed once for the costume as a whole – research, assemblage, mess, testing or performed as a sequence for separate costume parts, e.g. researching a character’s prop, assembling the materials and techniques, shaping and testing it.

Each of these stages of cosplay assembly involves processes of objectification. In deciding which character to cosplay a cosplayer may externalise an aspect of self, or alternatively objectify existing social relations and negotiations with other members of a community of practice. In undertaking research and developing a mental model of the character cosplayers practically negotiate the value of accuracy. Through collecting materials cosplayers again employ ‘skilled vision’ (Grasseni, 2007) and develop practice-specific knowledge. Through intensive tactile interaction in the mess stage cosplayers develop further technical competences and develop a personalised relationship with the object. Finally, in the testing stage cosplayers prepare their assembled objects and consequentially themselves for evaluation by a wider cosplay community.
4.3 Choosing the Cosplay

Fundamentally underpinning the cosplay assembly process is the character (Lunning, 2011; Okabe, 2012; Peirson-Smith, 2013). Characters chosen for cosplay are drawn from texts which are visual, linguistic, temporal and, in the case of film, television programs and many videogames, auditory. In the case of film, television, anime and videogame cosplays, the chosen character is often not the creation of a sole author but the product of the collaboration between writers, designers, animators, directors and actor. Within the cosplay community individual characters are often treated not as whole entities but as comprising three aspects: the character’s visual look; the character’s ‘personality’, including disposition, typical speech patterns and bodily comportment; and the character’s role within a narrative (Eiji and Steinberg, 2010) or database (Azuma, 2009). Each of these aspects of character is given greater or lesser emphasis by cosplayers in the contexts of different cosplay practices. In the practice of cosplay assembly it is the aspect of the character’s visual look which is the primary focus of attention as the purpose of cosplay construction is the recreation of the character’s appearance in the form of a wearable costume.

A cosplayer’s decision to portray a particular character is often represented in community and academic literature as a personal choice where the cosplayer individually decides upon a character from personal motivations, see for example (Lunning, 2010, 2011; Peirson-Smith, 2013; Truong, 2013). This idea is closely associated with the community value of amateurism as described in Chapter 3. However, in practice choice of character is never a decision that a cosplayer makes without reference to the wider community of practice. As Woodward (2007b) has argued in her ethnography of the dressing practices of Western women, deciding what to wear can involve the negotiation of many competing elements including aesthetics, materiality, personal desires and community expectations. Cosplay, like all forms of dress practice is performative; it is a strategic presentation of self (Goffman, 1990). An assembled costume will be worn on the cosplayer’s body, seen and evaluated by members of the local community, and, through digital distribution, potentially seen and evaluated by a wider online community. In their decision–making processes cosplayers must negotiate a number of elements their own desires and intentions, the desires and intentions of other cosplayers they are working with, the performance contexts in which the cosplay will be worn, and
4.3. CHOOSING THE COSPLAY

the imagined desires of the potential audience of the costume.

Dress choice as an externalisation of self has long been a theme of anthropological dress literature (Strathern, 1979; Woodward, 2005). Drawing on Gell (1998), Woodward (2005) has argued that clothing can be viewed as a form of distributed personhood. In cosplay the relationship between self and costume is regularly discussed and within Australian communities of practice the idea that cosplayers can or should select characters on the grounds of personal identification was commonly expressed. When interviewed as to why they chose to cosplay a particular character, cosplayers would regularly respond that they liked or admired that particular character, emphasised with them or recognised aspects of themselves in that character:

My favourite thing about the character, I think, is that he’s got a really endearing personality and character but I was also very much drawn to the costume design. (Sierra, Interview Video Madman Website Author’s Transcript)

My favourite thing about “Fai” is that he’s a very happy–go–lucky character with a very serious background to him so there’s a lot of depth and range in him. I really enjoy it. It’s been a dream costume to do because he’s been a favourite character of mine for a long time.

(Pistachio and Bubblegum, Interview Video Madman Website Author’s Transcript)

Alternatively, cosplayers saw the character as an aspirational model and they wanted to be like that character for the duration of a performance:

I love wearing my “Pinkie Pie” because I can run around and go, ‘hee, hee, hee’ and just, like... be happy. (Renee, Author’s Interview 2012)

However, identification or admiration for particular characters or texts was often weighted against other concerns. Daniel wanted to cosplay as a character from the HBO’s Game of Thrones, a favourite television series:

C: So if you could choose a Game of Thrones character?
D: I don’t know I’ve looked... I could do “Littlefinger” but I don’t think I’d be authentic enough to do “Littlefinger” because I’m too young. And I could do one of the Lannisters but that’s too expensive so I don’t know... Because the barrier is going to be in the construction.

(Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

In these musings Daniel considers the potential factors that could affect his ability to create a successful “Littlefinger” cosplay: his youthful appearance, his competence and his budget. As part of his decision–making process Daniel also looked online at the costumes of other Game of Thrones cosplayers:

I’ve looked at what other people did. The first thing I did was I decided to do a Game of Thrones cosplay so I Googled it because we all post pictures of all these things on the internet. I wanted to see what everyone else had done first so that I could work out if I could do it, and if I could do it not crap. I didn’t want to do a really shit “Varys”, or something, and shove up my pillow up my shirt if everyone else was an actual fat man with no hair who looked exactly like the person. (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

Daniel was unsure whether his costume could achieve a comparable standard or surpass pre–existing cosplays. In these comments Daniel anticipates his costume being seen and compared with other cosplays at the convention or displayed in photographs online. While he viewed the choice of potential cosplay as his own personal decision, this was not a decision to be made without considering others and their imagined responses.

As dress theorists have argued choice of attire may be an act of personal expression but this personal desire is often negotiated against other influencing factors such as fashion and community expectations (Clarke and Miller, 2002; Banerjee and Miller, 2003; Hansen, 2004; Sandikci and Ger, 2005; Woodward, 2007b). In some contexts cosplayers may have very limited character choices. When participating in groups, cosplayers may be assigned a particular character by others or may choose a character only in negotiation with other team members. When participating in a Suckerpunch cosplay group for the film’s local premiere Julia did not choose to cosplay the character she performed. Describing the group’s process of assigning characters, Julia claimed that she was happy cosplaying the character “Amber” but her role had been decided for
4.3. CHOOSING THE COSPLAY

her by other members:

J: [...] We didn’t have someone doing “Amber” for a while. I was going to do “Madame Gorsky” and then we realised we didn’t have an “Amber” so I got pressured into doing “Amber”.

C: Do you ever get the situation where someone really looks like the character but they really don’t want to do them?

J: I think people usually go along with it. One girl had the right hair for “Rocket” so they convinced her to make it.

(Julia, Author’s Interview 2012)

The reasons for assigning and negotiating character choices in these contexts often stems from the group members’ desire to have all the major characters represented and avoid multiple representations of individual characters in performance at events. Again, this can be seen as a reflection of the value of spectacle as choices are made in order to create a performance that will better appeal to an imagined audience.

Sometimes cosplayers may choose to cosplay as particular characters that will complement the costumes chosen by their friends, choosing characters that come from the same text, series or franchise. Julia and her close friend decided to cosplay together as female Daleks from Doctor Who. When I attended AVCon as “Allen Schezar” from the anime, The Vision of Escaflowne, my sister decided to accompany me as rival character “Van Fanel”. Choosing complementary characters can allow cosplayers to attend events together performing as a team. If their outfits have similar or matching design elements cosplayers may also join forces in assembly activities, sharing materials and competences. Cosplaying as complementary characters can therefore strengthen the social bonds between cosplayers or serve to represent existing bonds. In this instance social motivations may play a more important role in cosplay choice than personal intentions or motivations. Peirson-Smith (2013) and Lunning (2010) argue that cosplay can function as an expression of collective identity. However, I would go further to suggest that collective identities are achieved through collective creativity. Cross-cultural studies of the production of artefacts in contexts such as the South Pacific (Giuffre, 2009) and Mali (Olesen, 2009) have demonstrated that the creative process is often a social one.
with producers influencing and contributing to the production of works. Just as selves can be objectified in cultural products, so too can relationships between creators be reified co–produced artefacts and performances.

Character choice can be an act of objectification where a cosplayer uses a costume as a deliberate externalisation of self. However, character choice can also, conversely, be an objectification of social relationships between cosplayers. The tensions between the ideas of cosplay as personal expression and social relationship will be revisited in greater depth in Chapter 5 which explores the dressed cosplay body as a site of negotiation, and Chapter 6 which explores the negotiation of performers’ intentions and audiences’ interpretations in hallway performances.

### 4.4 Research

When I decide that there’s a costume that I want to make, or I have an idea what I do is Google. Google is like the costumer’s best friend. I go through Google, research, find out. If you want to do a straight copy of something from a movie, an anime or a TV show you go through and find as many images as you can from all the different angles and different lights of that costume. Then you look at what other people have done. And then you say, this person made it out of cotton. This person made it out of satin. This person has painted it on instead of sewing on different coloured panels. This one will be easier. This one will be harder but it looks better, kind of thing. And then you decide how you’re going to do it yourself. And then you go out and buy the materials and whack it together.

(Renee, Author’s Interview 2012)

In panels, tutorials and interviews cosplayers would describe the activity of finding images, ‘reference pictures’, and information about the chosen character as the initial stage of cosplay assembly. Research serves a dual purpose: to enable the cosplayer to build a mental model of a complete visual look of the character, assisting them to produce an accurate cosplay; and to provide the cosplayer with insights into how that accurate cosplay may be achieved. While panels and online tutorials often take for granted that research will occur before any other cosplay assembly activities, the narratives of as-
4.4. RESEARCH

Assemblage processes of cosplayers indicate that cosplayers may perform research activities again later in the assembly process, for example before beginning a new part of the costume such as the shoes.

Almost every cosplayer engages in research to a greater or lesser extent. Ben, an experienced cosplayer and member of the ACG, reported that much of the five to ten hours he spent per week on costuming activities was devoted to research. As a novice cosplayer assembling his first “Captain Jack” costume, Daniel reported that he did very little research. However, after attending his first convention in costume and seeing other more ‘accurate’ versions of the “Captain Jack” costume he conducted a considerable amount of online research before assembling a second version.

Cosplayers’ activities during the research stage appear to be centred upon mimicry. Cosplayers collect reference pictures and information in the attempt to ensure that their costume recreates an original design, the prototype, as closely and completely as possible. The activity of research is directly associated with the community value of ‘accuracy’, discussed in the previous chapter. In their research activities cosplayers are enacting and reinforcing this value. However, in practice the research phase of the assembly processes also problematises this notion of accuracy. As they commence their research activities the question that quickly arises for the beginner cosplayer is, accurate to what, exactly? During the research stage cosplayers are required to redefine and reassemble the appearance of the chosen character from an array of pre-existing images of the character. This activity requires problem-solving and creative choices on the part of the cosplayer who must decide how their recreation of the character is going to look. Like the subjects of Woodward’s (2007b) and Hansen’s (2005) ethnographies who attempted to create a complete visual look through assembling dress items, in the research stage cosplayers attempt to assemble a complete visual of a particular character through negotiating multiple texts and images. Research activities may be centred upon accuracy but accuracy here is practically negotiated and assembled.

Popular characters chosen by cosplayers may appear in a number of media. For example, the appearance of characters from the media franchise *Trinity Blood*, a popular choice for cosplayers in recent years, differ slightly in the manga, light novels, anime and art books. These differences in adaptation can be for creative reasons or due to technical limitations such as the difficulties of animating images with an extraordinary level of detail. When deciding to assemble a costume based on a particular character the
cosplayer may be faced with an overwhelming array of different visual looks and styles for the same character. Cosplayers are limited in their ability to represent the character in cosplay in that they are creating (typically) one physical outfit. The cosplayer must make a choice: do they recreate the manga version, the anime version, or the art book version?

In interview mecha suit cosplayer Santhosh described his dilemma when recreating the “Zaku” suit from the *Gundam* anime/model/videogame franchise:

S: Interestingly, *Gundam* never had a manga. It was a complete anime at the start. It was really open to canon. There were a lot of people doing their own designs and if you look at the Zaku, there were at least ten mobile suit variations. If you look at one character, Shin Matsunaga, who had a prototype Zaku which had these thrusters, they’re massive! If you look at Char Aznable’s Zaku, in the manga it didn’t have any thrusters on the legs but if you look at the model design there was one done by the official designer and then there was one by the official creator, his version of it. If you notice the difference, the official designer had thrusters at the back; the official creator didn’t have thrusters at the back but had thrusters on the backpack itself. And you’re like wow, which one do I choose?

C: You have to decide whether you choose to go for one exact reproduction or whether you choose to blend a couple of them?

S: Yeah. And again, if you want to go in the competition, one of the strengths they look for is originality. How close are you to the original character? How are you supposed to do that with my costume? It’s a little bit hard because it’s debatable. (Santhosh, Author’s Interview 2012)

Essentially research poses a conundrum to cosplayers: characters may have many different visual looks but for the purposes of assembling a cosplay the cosplayer has to focus on a single complete visual look.

Cosplayers therefore have to assemble for themselves a model of a complete visual look for the character, which they can use as a benchmark for the accuracy of their costume.
Creative approaches are regularly used by cosplayers in the attempt to address this problem. Some choose to create a costume that combines elements of different versions of the character’s visual appearance. Cosplayers may also choose to create multiple costumes based on different versions of the one character. Other cosplayers, particularly for the purpose of competitions, even create changing costumes which morph from one look to the other by losing or gaining parts during performance. At the competition held at SMASH I witnessed a particularly striking example where a female *Penguindrum* cosplayer removed parts of her costume in the manner of a burlesque performer. But for other cosplayers the formation of the model may involve choosing a particular media version, for example the anime film depiction, and attempting to only recreate that particular version. Furthermore, some choices may be made on the level of tiny details the decision to recreate one prop or the other, to use three buttons or four on the cuffs.

A single particular look must be assembled. However, reflecting the value of completism, this look must also be a complete visual look: the character’s appearance in front, back, sides, proportions, details and colours must all be recreated in the costume if the cosplayer wishes to achieve accuracy. Research activities require cosplayers to practically utilise the cosplay ‘skilled vision’ (Grasseni, 2007) described in Chapter 3 as they sift through potentially thousands of digital and material resources including websites, screen shots, art books and even three dimensional toys and models to uncover new details in the character’s design.

Cosplayers do not perform these activities in social isolation. The quest for an accurate model of a character can be a public activity involving discussion and debate of a character’s features. Julia described to me a problem that she was encountering with her “Princess Merrida” costume from Disney’s *Brave* (2011). From the visual texts she had gathered for the costume still images, promotional materials she could not tell whether the princess’s dress was supposed to be green or blue as it appeared to be greener in some images and bluer in others. She told me she had seen pictures of other cosplayers who had created the costume and sometimes their costumes seemed too green or too blue. Julia wanted to recreate the character accurately and did not want to ‘get it wrong’ by wearing a wrongly coloured costume to public events. To overcome this dilemma she told me she had sought other information about the costume in online forum discussions and eventually told me she found ‘official’ confirmation of the dress’s colour in the transcript of an interview with an animator from Pixar. The animator was appar-
CHAPTER 4. (RE)CREATING

Figure 4.2: “Juri” cosplays (Photographs by Patrick Korbel)
ently asked by a member of the audience what colour the dress was supposed to be and had replied that the dress was supposed to be blue. Julia told me that she was therefore treating the dress as blue. Julia's interpretation of accuracy was not made in isolation but through consultation with a wider community of practice.

Once the references have been gathered the cosplayer then composites the images and details into a model of the character. This model may exist entirely in the imagination and memory of a cosplayer or more commonly is made manifest by cosplayers storing a digital folder of images, or printing them out for use during the assembly stage:

> What I usually do is I'll have a reference of my character and then I'll start sketching out my character. You don't have to be an amazing artist to be able to do this. If you do a rough sketch of the character you'll see, oh, this design is here and this detail is over there. And then you can start taking pieces away from the design and going, okay, what garment do I have to make for this? Do I have to make pants? Do my pants have to be attached to my top? Do I have a shirt that needs to go underneath? All that kind of thing. You need to discover what aspects of the costume you need to put together...’

(Sierra, SMASH Cosplay Panel Author’s Transcript 2012)

This quotation from master cosplayer Sierra traces the transitions at play between the stages of the assembly process as model is first assembled from reference images, sketched by the cosplayer, and then disassembled into component parts which will need to be ‘put together’ materially by the cosplayer in the following stages.

Again, this work is often performed in collaboration or through consultation with other practitioners. For example, while creating her “Fluttershy” costume from My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic (Hasbro, 2001) Julia sent me frequent text and Facebook messages as she attempted to work out how to translate various aspects of the character model into physical objects. She sent me links to various websites that were selling necklaces that she wanted the character to wear. We discussed how she was going to make the character’s wings out of felt and how she was going to achieve a colour match using dyes. As items that she had purchased online arrived at her home she would send me pictures of her wearing the component parts: a photograph of herself wearing the plastic ears she had bought. Gradually the separate parts were again considered part of a whole design.
Figure 4.3: “Fluttershy” (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)
As these accounts demonstrate even this research stage of cosplay assembly involves processes of objectification as cosplayers create their own, personalised models of character accuracy. Throughout this stage cosplayers practically negotiate the values of accuracy and completism to construct their own unique model of the character, in the process gaining community–specific skills.

4.5 Collecting

Never underestimate anything as being able to be used in a costume. Eventually you’ll get to the point where you’ll view anything and everything as costume parts. (Cassandra, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2012)

C: What are some skills you think a costumer really needs to have?

J: Shopping! [laughs] (Julia, Author’s Interview 2012)

Once the character model has been assembled cosplayers will then go about gathering materials and techniques to use in the construction of their character recreation. Knowing how to shop, scavenge and borrow are key competences for this stage. Studies of consumption practices have identified shopping as a skilled activity with different skills and aims for different fields be it bargain hunting or shopping to display cultural or economic status or to demonstrate appreciation of subcultural authenticity (Jackson et al., 2005; Clarke, 1998). Shopping can provide a key context for the production of objectifications (Jackson et al., 2005; Hansen, 2005; Clarke, 1998)). As with assemblages in the Western art world, cosplay costumes are assembled from ‘found objects’. The finding of these objects is an activity requiring time, effort and skill on the part of the cosplayer, and importantly a knowledge of sites (physical and digital) to search for items and a knowledge of how to evaluate items for their cosplay potential. In this way, through shopping, cosplayers come to develop strong relationships with their materials and learn to internalise cosplay aesthetics.

Knowing where to shop can be particularly important for cosplayers as the materials they are looking for can sometimes be quite specialised and difficult to find. This can be the case with craft materials such as liquid latex for making prosthetics or thermal
plastics such as Wonderflex for building props, or also with pre–made specialty items like Victorian pocket–watches or officially licensed accessories such as character rings, brooches or badges. At other times knowing where to shop can be about knowing which kind of local, ‘everyday’ store is going to stock items with cosplay potential which Salvation Army outlet stocks a wider range of men’s clothes, which fabric stores have the greatest range and value, or even which suburbs have the best items left out for hard rubbish collection.

A clear illustration of the skills and knowledge involved in material collection and the objectification processes at work in these consumption activities is evident in an analysis of wig shopping. Wigs, an item not usually worn by cosplayers in their non–cosplaying lives, are commonly used to replicate the hair colour and style of the chosen character. Novice cosplayers must learn where to purchase wigs. Wigs can be purchased at local costume stores, discount stores or local wig specialty stores or through online stores. This specialised knowledge is often disseminated among cosplayers at panels, in online tutorials and in casual conversations.

However, knowing how to correctly buy a wig regularly involved more than knowing the name of a retailer or online store. Keller (2001) has highlighted that the selection of materials poses challenges for artisans as there is always a risk that a material may be faulty or inappropriate and may damage the whole. A thorough understanding of the properties of materials and the ability to determine their appropriateness for projects are the hallmarks of an experienced practitioner Keller (2001). In the case of wigs, experienced cosplayers emphasised that wigs could vary in materials, quality, price and appropriateness for cosplay. Cosplayers spoke of three different kinds of wigs: party wigs made from low quality synthetic fibres, usually costing under AU$30; synthetic cosplay wigs made from higher quality, often heat–resistant, fibres, costing between AU$30 and 80; and human hair wigs, able to be styled using the same tools, often costing over AU$100. Party wigs were often denigrated by practitioners as being inappropriate for cosplay as their cuts and weaves were poor and the appearance of the cheaper fibres would seem too shiny in photographs.

Stories of wig purchasing that were recounted to me during field work reveal how the On one occasion Julia accidentally purchased a party wig online. Upon discovering her mistake she posted to her cosplaying friends on Facebook, asking if there was any way to dull the shine. To achieve the look she wanted Julia had to purchase an alternative
wigs from another online store. Alternatively, purchasing a higher quality wig at the wrong store could lead to a cosplayer being ‘ripped off’. Once, eager to avoid making the ‘mistake’ of purchasing a cheap wig, I bought a more expensive, heat resistant wig, not realising that the high level of heat resistance in the fibres would make it extremely difficult for me to style the wig into the curls that I desired.

4.6 **Mess**

Whenever you come over to my house there’re always pins in the floor, there’re always spare threads everywhere. I’ve always got threads all over my clothes, glue under my nails. As you can see I’ve still got paint from last night on my fingers. It’s a messy business. There’s no way of doing it and keeping stuff clean. It’s creative mess, though.

(Renee, Author’s Interview 2012)

I have termed the third stage of the cosplay assembly process mess. This tactile, materials-focused activity whereby objects are broken down, shaped and transformed through the techniques of the cosplayer, regularly involves everyday understandings of mess. As in Renee’s quote above, in this stage of assembly the borders between materials and cosplayers’ bodies are often fluid. Cosplayers describing their assembly processes would regularly relate incidents of cutting themselves with blades, suffering burns or even putting their long term health at risk by inhaling fibreglass particles when working without a respirator. In a painful accident I managed to get Superglue over my ear, hair and the side of my face. Hands and bodies of cosplayers leave impressions all over the materials. Julia, explaining the construction of her “Vampire Willow” corset, described how she had to get a friend to wrap her T-shirted torso in duct tape to create a form of her own body for her to work on. Of the finished garment she said, ‘traces of many people’s blood were left on the corset.’

Mess is the crucible stage of the cosplay assembly process. Materials are transformed by cosplayers’ bodies and cosplayers’ bodies are transformed through working with the materials. The act of creating artefacts is an act of self-creation (Miller, 1987; Malko-georgou, 2011). Material culture authors have emphasised that practitioners develop strong relationships with objects that they have created by hand (Hoskins, 1998; Dobres,
Figure 4.4: Wig
4.6. MESS

2001; O’Connor, 2005; Malkogeorgou, 2011). Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of ‘habitus’, O’Connor (2005) argues that through working with materials craft practitioners literally inscribe skills and craft knowledge upon their bodies. In the mess stage the self-creation aspect of objectification is practical and embodied as through working with materials cosplayers physically acquire new skills. A common sentiment in the cosplay community that cosplayers learn skills by ‘doing it themselves’, by playing with materials until they get it right.

You don’t need to have a ton of experience when you start making a costume; you sort of build up your experience as you go. As long as you’ve got enthusiasm for the project, if you really, really want it, that will drive you to learn new techniques and try out new techniques and materials.

(Darren, ACG Panel Author’s Transcript 2012)

It is perhaps no surprise then that it is a cosplayer’s ability to perform in the mess stage of cosplay assembly that is the most crucial to the cosplayer being judged as competent. The guidelines of many cosplay competitions state that only costumes that have been constructed or made predominantly by the cosplayer – where the materials have been altered and shaped by the cosplayer’s own hands and tools are eligible for entry into workmanship categories or even the competition itself. Costumes assembled from predominantly premade garments and accessories, which typically involve only a few of the transformative activities described in the mess stage, are therefore barred from recognition in these contestations of prestige.

The mess stage also involves processes of assemblage. Activities revolve around the transformation of the assembled materials the cloth, plastic, cardboard, beads, glue, or thread into a ‘complete’ costume or costume part. Physically, this activity typically involves the materials being broken down or altered in some way before being reconstituted in a different form. This truly is the (re)creation phase of the practice. In the case of sewing this is evident in the cutting of pre-existing fabric into pieces (which viewed separately have little visual resemblance to the finished garment) which are then refashioned into the shape of the garment using a sewing machine, hand stitching or even hot glue. Clays, thermal plastics and fabrics, and wig fibres are re-shaped and fixed through the use of deliberate temperature changes. Papier-mache involves a similar process whereby paper is cut into shreds, moistened into pulp, sculpted and shaped by hands or tools and then fixed by either being left to dry or baked in an oven or kiln.
Advanced techniques such as vacuum forming or other moulding and casting processes require materials to undergo multiple changes of form and even substance as sculptures created in plasticine are used to make casts for silicon moulds which will then be used to cast the final part in yet another plastic. Even painting and varnishing can be seen to fit this pattern of deformation to reformation as paint, applied as a liquid, will then dry as solid transforming the object’s visual and textural appearance.

The competences required in this stage are focused upon the transforming of the materials into a form that will mimic the shape, colour, comparable size and texture of the character’s appearance or outfit. To do this successfully, cosplayers must have both a good understanding of the particular physical properties of the materials they are working with as well as the embodied knowledge of the skills needed to shape these materials. For example, for the construction of her “Merrida” costume I gave Julia some spare brown vinyl a material she had not worked with before. One week I received a series of text and Facebook messages from Julia asking about the fabric, could it be sewn on the machine? What sort of paint would work on it? In creating the accessory for her
costume Julia had to simultaneously understand the vinyl as both a physical object, a fabric with a set of particular properties and potentials, and as a future costume part, a quiver for prop arrows.

Cosplayers working with materials in this stage may shift their perception of the meanings of the objects between recognising the object as a ‘craft material’ with particular physical and chemical properties, and the object as a potential cosplay item. Foam, fabric, interfacing, glue and thread need to appear to the wearer and the audience as a shoe. The cosplayer’s ability to achieve this transformation successfully will, in part, depend on his or her embodied level of competency in particular transformation techniques sewing, sculpting, moulding and casting, painting or his and her ability to access the competences of others within cosplay networks getting advice or training from masters, obtaining assistance from friends or commissioning parts.

Even in this very practical phase of assembly cosplayers are engaged in creative negotiation. As previous studies (Mall, 2007; Nakamura, 2007) have demonstrated, the practice of craft techniques, rather than being a mere mechanised repetition of learnt movements can in fact require and inspire creativity on the part of the technician. Mall (2007) has further argued that this comes about in part due the properties of the materials the craftspeople are working with they will not always do as they are told. For cosplayers, the task of shaping the assembled materials into the required form can sometimes be a struggle. Santhosh described to me his feelings of frustration as he could not always get the cardboard shaped in a way that would mimic the legs of the “Zaku”. In the case of the “Zaku”, as often happens during cosplay construction, the materials chosen cannot be shaped using the techniques or tools originally used by the cosplayer so new strategies must be devised, changes or compromises made.

Sometimes it is the competency level of the cosplayer which causes the problem. As an inexperienced sewer I felt frequently frustrated by the inability to sew the garments in a way that would perfectly fit my body. It has only been through ongoing learning through experimentation and instruction from others that I am now able to shape garments in the way that I desire.
4.7 Testing

Testing is the fourth stage of the cosplay assembly practice. It is not necessarily the ‘final’ stage in the process as testing may also occur throughout the duration of costume’s construction, often taking place, for example, after the completion of a particular costume part such as a jacket or shoes. However, testing activities can only be performed by the cosplayer after they have engaged in some level of research, assemblage and mess activities. Testing also occurs before presenting the costume to a wider, public audience, before the work of the cosplayer is thrust out into cosplay networks. In relation to dress, Hansen (2005, p.114–115) has argued that individuals rehearse clothing combinations to anticipate how they will be viewed by others. She argues that this can be considered a form of experimentation as the full impact of dress on others cannot always be accurately predicted until it is worn and shown to an audience (Hansen, 2005, p.17). Testing is a similarly experimental activity where a created object is evaluated by the practitioner and others against community aesthetic standards.

Essentially, testing is an activity whereby cosplayers compare their assembled costume or costume part to their model of the character’s visual appearance and evaluate the costume for its accuracy and wearability. Keller (2001) has argued that craft processes require the practitioner to perform ongoing checks of the object in production to ensure that its features match an ideal standard. The wearability (or portability, in the case of props) of costume items becomes an especially important attribute here because an assembled costume can be amazingly accurate but is rendered meaningless if the cosplayer cannot wear the costume on their body. Furthermore, a costume that does not fit properly on a cosplayer’s body may not look as accurate for while the cosplayer may have recreated a character’s outfit with a perfect colour match down to the last button, if the garment does not hang or sit correctly on the cosplayer’s body the shape and drape of the garment will not be accurate. For these reasons testing activities often involve the cosplayer ‘trying on’ parts of their costumes, seeing how the fashioned items work when assembled with their own bodies.

Skilled cosplay vision is a key competency again in the testing stage. Here the cosplayer must be able to visually evaluate their costume part in terms of its resemblance to the character model, ‘Does it look right?’ Cosplayers attempt to envisage their costume through the eyes of potential audiences—cosplayers and non–cosplayers, friends
and rivals. Some will even photograph items of their costume to check that the colours they have chosen appear ‘accurate’ in the eyes of the camera as well as to the naked human eye. For the part to appear as ‘accurate’ it must look like a shoe or a sword or a dress rather than an assembly of its component parts foam, thread, material, fibreglass. The assembled materials must present the outward appearance of a complete whole and processes of transformation undertaken during the mess stage must be complete. A golden halo must not reveal the beer poster cardboard it is created from. The original material nature of monstrous demon horns constructed from toilet rolls and foam must not be evident to audiences. The aim is for audiences to read the cosplay costume as the character not the as the creative processes of the cosplayer. The cosplayer’s creative choices of materials and their skills in shaping those materials are deliberately obscured. On the surface the cosplay costume should appear to be a copy of the character model. The efforts, skills and creative choices of the cosplayer that were utilised during the assembly process are only unravelled and displayed in particular contexts such as cosplay competitions (to be discussed later in Chapter 7).

In conversations with experienced, competitive cosplayers, the idea of the difference between the outside and the inside of costumes would often be mentioned:

I always have this theory: my motto with costuming is it’s all about what’s on the outside. I don’t care what’s on the inside. If it looks terrible on the inside, whatever, I don’t care. It’s what’s on the outside that’s important.  
(Ben, Author’s Interview 2012)

For experienced cosplayers if the insides of their costumes show the processes of (re)creation with unlined garments, unravelling stitches and lines of glue, this is perfectly acceptable as long as the outward appearance is accurate and does not show evidence of processes. These experienced cosplayers have learnt not to waste their time and effort on finishing aspects of the garment that will not be seen by audiences.

Like other stages of cosplay assembly testing, is a social activity requiring the cosplayer to envisage how their creation will be perceived by others. Testing can be carried out by the cosplayer alone or with the assistance of other friends and cosplayers who may provide further criticism as in the case of Santhosh and his “Zaku” mobile suit cos-
play:

Things like my Zaku, you can actually pick a lot of errors if you’re a really big fan of the Zaku. I had a few friends and I was showing them the Zaku and they were like, that Zaku’s thin!  

(Santhosh, Author’s Interview 2012)

Providing comments and analysis of other people’s costumes can be an activity requiring some tactical negotiations. Cosplayers often express the desire to want to help other cosplayers make their costumes better and more accurate. However, there is also a fear that negative evaluations may upset the cosplayer who may feel it as an attack on their work, skills and efforts. Santhosh here describes one such dilemma experienced by his friend Pontip, a prize–winning master armour builder, when commenting on photographs from a recent convention event:

He was looking back on all the pictures of Manifest and he saw one that did the Halo costume and he was trying not to be a, forgive my language, be a prick to them and say, ‘You missed that one part!’ His pauldron was wrong! This side of the arm, not that side! [...] he stopped himself from saying that because he realised he [the other guy] had put a lot of effort into it.  

(Santhosh, Author’s Interview 2012)

Often cosplaying friends will try to give comments and assistance in the testing stage as a means of helping avert the risk of the cosplayer receiving negative feedback from gatekeepers in the community when the cosplayer displays their finished work in public contexts such as events or as a photograph displayed online. Anxieties that one’s work and therefore one’s skills and knowledge as a cosplayer may be negatively evaluated by members of wider cosplay networks are an undercurrent present in the testing stage.

If a costume or costume part fails to accurately recreate the character model, what then? The cosplayer can make one of two choices. They can choose to accept and wear an inaccurate or ill–fitting costume if time pressures are too great or they are focusing on other cosplay activities such as performing, photographing other cosplayers or simply hanging out with others; or they can choose to reshape the existing part or replace or recreate it. For many dedicated cosplayers the choice will be the second option. When the materials or techniques chosen, or the skill level of the cosplayer in shaping those materials fail to create the proper effect the cosplayer will be forced to retrace their steps
in the assembly process and recreate their recreation once more.

In the testing stage the costume object is prepared for a community of practice. The practitioner here must decide if the object(s) he or she has created objectifies various qualities valued by the community. Is the object accurate? Is it complete? Would its faults be recognised by an audience? In many instances the testing stage actually involves presenting the object to other trusted practitioners for specific evaluation. The anxiety experienced by some cosplayers during this stage is evidence of the close, personalised relationship that develops between practitioners and assembled costumes. A judgement of the costume object can be simultaneously a judgement of the cosplayer, their choices, competences and efforts.

4.8 Conclusion: Objectifications, Creativity and Practice

Cosplay has been dismissed and derided by mainstream media sources within Australia. At the heart of some of these criticisms is the idea that cosplayer’s efforts are essentially pointless. Cosplayer creations merely copy a pre-existing design and are therefore devoid of creativity and unworthy of the prestige attributed to ‘original’ works. Through an exploration of the cosplay assembly process I have demonstrated that cosplayers’ copying activities are highly complex and creative. Echoing the findings of ethnographic studies of copying practices in a variety of cultural contexts (Hallam and Ingold, 2007; Cox, 2007), I have demonstrated that cosplayers’ copying involves considerable knowledge and skill and requires the cosplayer to make ongoing creative choices and negotiations of aesthetics and values.

Cosplayers’ assembly processes produce more than costume objects. Costume assembly processes are processes of objectification. As cosplayers stitch cloth, style wigs and mould thermal plastic they form personalised relationships with costume items. These very processes not only enable a costumer to assemble a costume but allow cosplayers to create themselves. In the assembly process cosplayers acquire skills and knowledge, forge relationships with other practitioners and negotiate their practices within a community of practice. Even the cosplayer who buys most of her costume’s component parts
online has still completed a process of choosing a character, researching that character, sourcing the items and combining them in a personalised manner. The activities of selecting and purchasing clothing have been identified as skilled activities (Clarke, 1998; Hansen, 2005; Woodward, 2007b). Through assembling a ‘bought cosplay’ cosplayer has still acquired skills and knowledge in identifying suitable characters for performance and locating appropriate stores and items. These skills are extended or reinforced with each new costume that a cosplayer attempts.

The assembly of cosplay objects also involves the creation and reproduction of social relations. Costumes are not assembled by sole practitioners working in isolation but instead are always the product of ongoing negotiations between practitioners and a broader community of practice. Community–specific skills and values are shared, reinforced or contested. In choosing and planning a character to perform, and in selecting, transforming and testing materials, cosplayers must actively interpret and objectify values of accuracy, completism, spectacle and amateurism.
Chapter 5

Looking Right, Feeling Pain: The Costumed Body and the Negotiation of Cosplay Values

At Adelaide’s Oz Comic-Con in March 2012 the local chapter of the Australian Costumers’ Guild ran a booth promoting their organisation. Staffed by two costumed guild members who chatted to the convention attendees passing by, the booth was decorated with photographs of guild members in costume and also featured a small display of costumes created by guild members. The costumes were arrayed on an assorted collection of mannequins and dress forms, some more human–like than others. Pinned to each costume was a small certificate that detailed the name of the character, the film, game or television programme from which the character had originated, and the name of the costumer(s) who had ‘recreated’ the character.

Viewing the costumes in the display was an interesting experience. Convention attendees could get very close to the costumes. Their proximity and stillness allowed me to observe details which I otherwise would not have noticed such as the extremely detailed embroidery on the bodice of the “White Queen’s” dress.

However, presented out of context, on mannequins rather than human bodies, the costumes looked somewhat odd. On the dress form the elegant sleeves of the “White Queen” gown fell limply to its sides. The dress form was also missing a head so the
Figure 5.1: “White Queen”
wig was placed awkwardly on the headless neck. Though I was familiar with the film I did not recognise the costume as the “White Queen” until I read the accompanying certificate.

Providing a contrast to the static costumes on display, a fully dressed “Master Chief” (from the Halo videogame series) cosplayer and guild member was hanging about nearby.

In the photograph depicted in Figure 5.2, the cosplayer’s face and gender are completely obscured. If not for the dynamism of his pose one could believe that he was another mannequin. However, as observed by convention attendees, this inhuman figure was in fact a costume worn by a person who could move, walk, pose, and chat in a muffled voice. His moving, transformed costumed body was a source of excitement for many convention attendees who would often exclaim out loud on seeing his costume and quickly reach for their cameras.

Entwistle (2000, p.10) describes dress as ‘embodied practice’. The meanings, uses, and potential effects of clothing are transformed when worn upon the body. For costumes to ‘look right’ they need to be inhabited by the body of the cosplayer filling them out and bringing them to life, lest they hang limp, immobile and unrecognisable like the costumes on the static display. Cosplay costumes are not sculptures and are assembled for the purpose of being worn.

To be a cosplayer is to wear cosplay costumes. Many people may be involved in the assembly of costumes who do not wear costumes themselves: family members, friends, craft or sewing teachers, or craft retail assistants. These people, while playing essential roles in cosplay communities, would not usually be considered cosplayers. In contrast to practices common in western fashion and professional theatrical performance where a performer or model may wear a costume designed and constructed almost exclusively by others, in cosplay the costumer is usually heavily involved in both the production and consumption of the costume they both assemble and wear the costume.

Cosplay is an assemblage of both craft and embodied performance. Bodies are the means by which material objects are connected and enlivened during performance (Mitchell, 2009, p.385). An exploration of how the craft aspects of cosplay are connected to its performance aspects requires an examination of how bodies are experienced and understood within communities of practice.
Figure 5.2: “Master Chief”
To explore the crucial role of bodies in cosplay this chapter examines a key debate which is enacted throughout Australian cosplay communities. This debate is centred upon the question of to what extent a cosplayer can and should transform their body in order to achieve an accurate cosplay performance. As cosplayers enact this debate in a variety of contexts including dressing activities, panel performances, competition narratives, and blog posts, they negotiate key community values and define the nature of the practice.

Pre–existing accounts of the body in practice tend to focus on the long–term changes and structuration wrought upon the body by the constant repetition of embodied activities (Bourdieu, 1990; O’Connor, 2005; Marchand, 2010). However, within cosplay dress practice the most important ‘technique of the body’ (Mauss, 1973) is the ability to perform a variety of temporary body transformations. For this reason, unlike many other practices found in sporting, performing or craft fields, the embodied practice of cosplay is not strongly focused on the repeated performance of a restricted set of practice–specific techniques.

In the absence of a more defined repertoire of bodily techniques, the role of the body in cosplay tends to be characterised by an ongoing debate between practitioners: those who believe that cosplayers should take extensive measures to ensure that their bodies visually resemble their chosen characters, and those who believe that bodily accuracy is impractical or unnecessary and that alternative values such as amateurism and self–expression are as important as accuracy.

Recent material culture literature has emphasised embodied dress as a potential site of negotiation of community–specific aesthetic and ethical values (Banerjee and Miller, 2003; Hansen, 2005; Woodward, 2007b; Wiley, 2013). Dress practices become a means by which individuals and the wider community negotiate particular contradictory values. Social values are put into action by the dress choices of individuals (Entwistle, 2000; Wiley, 2013). In choosing whether to alter their own bodies for performances cosplayers negotiate the values of the practice. Dressing activities themselves are potent social actions but dress and clothing can also be the subject of wider commentary and debate within communities (Lentz, 1995). Negotiations over the role of the dressed body in cosplay are expanded further into other aspects of the practice through cosplayers’ discussions of this issue in competition narratives and online conversations. In these practical negotiations cosplayers both reproduce and challenge pre–existing cos-
5.1 Bodies in Practice

Discussions of bodies in practice frequently draw on Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of habitus to explore how community values are inscribed as dispositions on practitioners’ bodies. Through ongoing, repetitive performance of particular techniques practitioners such as dancers (Aaltonen, 1997; Turner and Wainwright, 2003), sportspersons (Spencer, 2009), professionals (Rice, 2010), and craftspeople (O’Connor, 2005; Marchand, 2010) acquire practice-specific embodied knowledge. In learning how to dance, fight or blow glass according to specific practice-community standards, practitioners are re-enacting the values and standards of that practice (Aaltonen, 1997; O’Connor, 2005; Spencer, 2009).

These processes are not so clearly evident in the practice of cosplay. Unlike many of the fields explored by the aforementioned ethnographies of practice, cosplay is not centred upon a restrictive set of techniques in either its craft or performance aspects. As described in Chapter 4, myriad techniques are available to the cosplayer assembling a costume. Likewise, in competition and hallway contexts many forms of performance techniques are acceptable, including mime, dance, singing and acrobatics.

Numerous critics of Bourdieu’s habitus have argued that the model is too inflexible and cannot account for heterogenous practice (Sewell, 1992; King, 2000; Warde, 2005). The explanatory power of the ‘habitus’ appears to be strongest when it is applied to fields where one set of bodily techniques dominates, relatively uncontested, for an extended period of time. The model does not easily fit with cosplay’s extremely broad range of bodily techniques and the practice’s emphasis on constant change.

Whether Bourdieu actually intended habitus to be interpreted as so prescriptive is debatable (Sweetman, 2003). However, practice-centred approaches to technique and the body often associate the concept of habitus with a strong emphasis on structuring and reproduction. Using a concept of the habitus, some ethnographies of practices depict a strong relationship between community values, practitioner identities and particular body of techniques which can be regularly rehearsed and replicated (Rice, 2010;
5.1. **BODIES IN PRACTICE**

O’Connor, 2005; Aaltern, 2005). Specific practitioner identities such as ‘doctor’ (Rice, 2010) or ‘ballet dancer’ (Aaltern, 2005) are intimately tied to the acquisition and enactment of particular embodied skills and knowledges. How then are embodied practitioner identities formed and maintained in practices like cosplay which embrace a varied and changeable range of physical techniques?

The role of the body in cosplay is not defined by one set of physical techniques; it is instead characterised by an ongoing community–specific debate. In contrast to practice literature which tends to emphasise relatively tight and stable relationships between body practices, community values and identities, recent dress literature has argued that dressed bodies can be sites of negotiation (Lentz, 1995; Durham, 1999; Woodward, 2007b). Durham (1999, p.390) argues that dress is ‘polyvalent’; it is imbued with numerous meanings and can be open to a range of interpretations. Through performing dress practices both individuals and communities are able to re–enact or contest aesthetic and community values, and develop individual and social identities (Durham, 1999; Wiley, 2013; Woodward, 2007b).

Debates over bodily aesthetics and dress practices can be closely linked to debates over moral or ethical community values (Durham, 1999; Banerjee and Miller, 2003; Sandikci and Ger, 2005). The clothing choices of an individual can provide a means of practically negotiating conflicting values, between tradition and modernity, community expectations and individualism or between an individual’s multiple roles or identities (Banerjee and Miller, 2003; Sandikci and Ger, 2005; Woodward, 2007b; Wiley, 2013).

In choosing whether or not to alter their bodies for cosplay performances, cosplayers contest various community values including accuracy, amateurism and creativity. The intentions of the cosplayer are matched against the limitations of their bodies. These negotiations are enacted in numerous contexts throughout the practice: in texts, in social dressing activities, in body projects, in panels and competitions, on public blogs.

As cosplayers debate the role of the body in cosplay through participating in body transformation and storytelling activities they simultaneously debate and recreate the meaning of cosplay as a practice. Cosplayers enact their conceptions of the body in practice, practitioners teach and learn various ways of viewing the body, and members of the community align themselves to specific sides of the debate, forming sub–groups and engaging in gate–keeping. Debates about the nature of the body in cosplay are not only
reflexive of the practice but generative.

### 5.2 Monstrous Bodies and Bodies as Tools

Before describing cosplayers’ body transformation activities I will first provide an examination of the idea of body transformation as it is represented in the texts read, viewed, played and used by cosplayers and which provide the source material for their costumes. I would in no way imply that these representations directly influence the ways that cosplayers understand their own bodies but I would argue that these representations are significant. The body, as an entity that is capable of physical transformations, is a recurrent and important trope of many cosplay source texts and these images of hybridised, transformed or transforming bodies are visually recreated by cosplayers in their costume objects and performances.

Examples of body transformations, events where characters undergo significant changes to their physical appearance either in the form of changes to their dress or to their bodies, are remarkably prevalent in all the text types that are frequently used by cosplayers: anime, manga, western comics, science fiction and fantasy films and videogames. Indeed amorphous, transforming bodies have been identified as a key trope of speculative fiction texts (Schaub, 2001; Weltzien, 2005). The notion of the transforming superhero, epitomised perhaps by the geekish, bespectacled “Clark Kent’s” swift metamorphoses into the brightly–costumed “Superman”, is a staple trope of Western comics (Weltzien, 2005).

Cosplayers even perform recreations of these transformation sequences in contexts such as competition skits. These performed transformations are achieved in a number of ways by removing parts of their costume or by adding additional items such as wings, or even simultaneously representing two forms of the character onstage as the winners of the 2011 Madman National championship did by representing the character “Amaterasu” from Capcom’s (2006) videogame Okami, in her wolf shape in the form of a puppet and in human shape by a costumed cosplayer.

Representations of body transformation in source texts can be roughly divided into representations that portray the transformed body as an object or tool and those that portray
it as an uncontrollable force, independent of the self. In the first representation the character is able to control the transformation of their body, the character chooses to transform, often as a means of gaining increased physical or magical powers which will in turn allow them to achieve a task. This depiction is common in Western superhero comics such as *Batman*, *Superman* and *Spiderman* (Weltzien, 2005), in shonen fighting series such as *Bleach* (Kubo 2001) where the protagonist “Ichigo Kurosaki” is able to adopt increasingly stronger supernatural/physical forms as a means of defeating opponents, and mecha series where pilot characters enter or merge with empowered robot bodies which allow them to engage opponents they could never hope to defeat in their normal human bodies.

In all these instances body transformation in these texts is represented as being controlled by the will of the character, empowering them in a moment of need. These transformed bodies are tools, frequently weapons,¹ to be used for specific, predefined purposes. The character’s skill in transforming and controlling that transformation often gains them prestige or allows them to enter into a community of other transforming characters – mecha pilots, fellow superheroes, ninja clans.

In contrast to this empowering depiction of body transformation are representations of transformation that portray bodies as things that structure and control a character’s emotions, behaviour and narrative journey. In these representations the characters’ bodies transform themselves, without the character’s will or consent. The character’s body is acting independently from the character’s conscious mind or is reacting to aspect of the character’s mind that he or she cannot control such as subconscious or emotional states. The character’s reaction to this uncontrolled transformation is often highly negative – fear, anger, annoyance, frustration – and may be played for humour, as in the case of poor “Ranma” of the manga *Ranma 1/2* who changes gender when doused with water of different temperatures, or horror as in the case of the hideous visceral transformations undergone by the character “Tetsuo” in the anime *Akira* (Napier, 2005).

In many popular cosplay source genres uncontrolled body transformations are portrayed as monstrous. Many of these transformations are inspired by pre–existing folklore and mythological traditions such the werewolf or the vampire. Characters who cannot con-

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¹In the case of the manga *Soul Eater* (Okubo 2004) this transformation is completely literal as human–like characters physically transform into recognizable weapons – guns, scythes, etc. – to be used as such by other characters.
trol their transformations are usually unable to consciously use their transformed bodies as tools, and in fact their bodies may be used by other forces or agents without their consent as in the case of representations of demonic possession.

Parallels can be drawn between the representations of transforming bodies in cosplay source texts and ideas about the role of bodies within cosplay communities of practice. Popular culture representations of the magically transformed body operating as a tool seem to echo the cosplay idea that the performing body can be viewed as a material object which can be shaped to achieve the cosplayer’s aims. Concepts of the body as an uncontrollable force can be also found in cosplay counter discourses that argue that the body cannot always be worked on like an object, flesh resists moulding. Both representations, however, share a common dualist notion of a separation between body and mind/self.

Another parallel between the representations of transforming bodies in source texts and body transformation in cosplay practice is the transience of these transformations. Like characters in the texts that they watch, read and play, cosplayers transform their bodies from modes of presentation they adopt in their ‘everyday’ lives to spectacular costumed forms. Parallels between transforming superheroes and transforming cosplayers have even been identified by mainstream media articles such as ‘We Can Be Heroes Just for Two Days’ (Sunday Mail 25/3/2012). Body transformations for superheroes and cosplayers alike are typically transient, lasting only for the period of an event. As cosplayers often vary the costumes they wear from event to event the nature of their body transformation activities and the skills used to effect these transformations may differ on each occasion.

The temporary changes of the cosplayer contrast with the longer-term changes to the physique emphasised in much practice literature. In contrast to ballet, football or pottery, in the performance of cosplay costumes it is the ability to transform one’s body for a short period of time which is important. A skilled cosplayer can adopt the dress and deportment of a queen for one event and that of a robot for another. The variety of costumes worn by members of the community entail that there is no one set of ‘techniques of the body’ (Mauss, 1973). The bodily characteristic that matters in cosplay is changeability. The element of routinisation and repetition which is typically viewed as fundamental to the development of embodied practitioner identities is therefore largely absent in cosplay.
The body transformations enacted by cosplayers for performances are largely transient but are also highly varied. Again contrasting with more typified descriptions of bodies commonly found in other practice literature, cosplay body transformation processes may take many forms, influenced largely by the appearance of the chosen character.

[...] This is one of the things they don’t tell you about cosplay. Sometimes you’ll end up working really hard to change how your body looks. One person gives up miso soup, one person makes a truly epic amount of armour; it’s incredible. (Host, MNCC Final 2011 Video Author’s Transcript)

Broadly, there are several different ways that cosplayers transform their bodies for cosplay performances. Cosplayers encase or hide their bodies, obscuring them inside layers of clothing or costumes made of thick or heavy materials. Cosplayers may wear masks that obscure the face or encase the entire head. Costume parts may also encase or constrict particular parts of the body, corsetry being one popular example where the ‘everyday’ shape of a woman’s, or indeed a man’s chest, stomach, breasts and hips are physically moulded into an hourglass shape by the garment.

Instead of encasing their bodies cosplayers actually expose and display them as part of their costume. This may involve cosplayers uncovering body parts such as thighs, breasts or topless chests in imitation of the ‘skimpy’ outfits worn by characters in the chosen source texts, or even occasionally partial nudity as in the case of a cosplayer performing “Doctor Manhattan”, from the Watchmen comics (Moore, 1986) at A VCon, whose visually accurate costume consisted of the cosplayer’s shaved, muscled body and a pair of underpants, both painted blue. Cosplayers may also reveal their bodies while technically being clothed from neck to ankle. Tight–fitting spandex outfits, full body ‘zentai suits’ or Morphsuits (most commonly worn by male cosplayers) may display, in considerable detail, the definitions of the cosplayer’s naked form covered only by a thin layer of fabric.

Cosplayers may use dress to make their bodies or general physical presence larger or at least appear larger to their audience. This may happen on a biological level in practices such as muscle building or ‘bulking up for cosplay’ or may be achieved through the use of costume parts. Armour suit cosplays may, for example, give the appearance of adding considerable bulk and presence to the cosplayer’s body.
Figure 5.3: Cat Head
Figure 5.4: “Jack Skellington”
Cosplayers also often change the colour of their bodies as part of their cosplay dress. The outfits and appearances of anime and videogame characters are often brightly or strikingly coloured and cosplay costumes based on these designs are likewise eye-catchingly bright, reflected in convention halls which often appear as a seething pageant of carnivalesque fluoro pinks, neon yellows, blood reds and dazzling gold. While their garments may be more brightly coloured than their everyday wear, cosplayers may also choose to change the colour of their skin, eyes and hair. Changes to skin colour may be effected through the use of tanning products, body paint, cosmetic make-up, or temporary tattoos.

Cosplay bodies may also be augmented with the addition of non-human extensions, additional ‘body parts’ that are attached to the cosplayer’s own. Interestingly, derived from their source designs, these non-human body augmentations are typically animalistic or machine-like in nature.

While all cosplayers enact some form of body transformation for performance, the type of transformation and extent to which it is enacted can vary considerably between cosplayers. In the sections below I will describe how, in choosing to perform some transformation activities and not others, cosplayers position themselves in relation to a community-wide debate. In engaging in some activities cosplayers enact the idea that the cosplayer body is an object that should be extensively transformed for the sake of accuracy in performance. This idea is also actively taught in performative and social contexts. Alternatively, by refusing to participate in some body transformation activities other cosplayers challenge or negotiate the dominant discourse and promote alternative concepts of the role of the body in the practice.

5.3 Body as Object in Body Projects

Having broadly described some of the types of body transformation activities practised by cosplayers, in the next section I will examine the view of the relationship between the body of the cosplayer and cosplay, which characterises the cosplayer’s body as another object or material, like Styrofoam, cardboard or cloth, that can and should be moulded and shaped by the cosplayer in the pursuit of accurately recreating the visual look of a character. Proponents of this view argue that achieving or at least striving for visual
Figure 5.5: “Kusuri–uri” (Photograph by Corey Newcombe)
Figure 5.6: Steampunk “Jack”
accuracy is important to the practice of cosplay.

Physical accuracy is valued by some cosplayers because it is seen as showing respect for the character and an expression of dedication and fandom (see Chapter 3). Many cosplayers strive for accuracy because it is appreciated by audiences including other cosplayers. Santhosh explores this aspect while describing the cosplaying activities of his novice friend Lim,

[...]
when he was just starting like me, he was like, ‘I’ll just put this on and be from Naruto.’ I was like, ‘You’re not even representing a character! You’re wearing sunnies; you’ve got your hair wrong. None of the characters look like that.’ And he was like, ‘I’m just having fun.’ And now slowly, he’s beginning to realise, like when he did the Gintama one, that it’s better to get it correct because all these people come up to you and go, Oh you look exactly like the character!’ That sort of reaction you get, it’s so much more awesome!’  

(Santhosh, Author’s Interview 2012)

In Santhosh’s narrative his friend Lim learns that accuracy is valued by the community. As a novice cosplayer Lim is learning the aesthetic values of the practice through receiving critiques or positive responses from more experienced cosplayers like Santhosh. Audiences, especially audiences of other cosplayers, play an important role in promoting particular understandings of cosplay accuracy.

Cosplayers who believe that the body should be transformed for cosplay performances often enact this idea through engaging in longer–term body transformation ‘projects’ (Shilling, 2003). Shilling (2003) has argued that individuals, particularly in developed Western societies, are increasingly viewing their bodies as objects, or ongoing projects, which can be developed and remoulded over time. In a parallel to Bourdieu’s habitus these transformation processes are linked to the formation of particular identities. However, moving beyond the habitus, Shilling’s (2003) concept of the ‘body project’ gives a stronger emphasis to agency. Agents commit to a particular body project in order to participate in a particular group or access a particular lifestyle. Participants have chosen to engage in these particular activities from a range of possible options.

Activities performed for cosplay which can be considered ‘body projects’ include dieting, body building, maintaining piercings, and long–term commitments to hairstyles. Similar activities have been identified as body projects in studies of bodybuilders (Gill
et al., 2005), hair salons (Barber, 2008) and body modification (Crossley, 2005). These transformation activities are undertaken by cosplayers in considerable advance of an upcoming event. They often effect longer term changes on the cosplayer’s body, changes that are visible to onlookers in contexts outside of cosplay activities such as members of the cosplayer’s family, friends or workmates. In undertaking body activities that require longer term commitment cosplayers demonstrate their willingness to sacrifice time and effort to the creative process.

Dieting and muscle–building are two body transformation activities practised by cosplayers. Public accounts of dieting and muscle building for cosplay were published by cosplayers online and performed as oral narratives in cosplay competitions. Sometimes these accounts are positioned as being broadly aspirational; the narrator explains their newfound success and happiness (in both cosplay and their broader life) upon achieving the transformation of their bodies. For example Taiwanese cosplayer Ajo described her cosplay success after her weight loss in ‘When Cosplay Makes You Diet’, an article posted on the Australian version of videogaming website Kotaku (Kotaku.com, 2013).

While some cosplayers may diet or engage in muscle building activities as part of broader body projects, shaping their bodies in accordance with body ideals of slimness and fitness present in wider Australian society, in some instances cosplayers may shape their bodies in order to mimic the physical features of a particular chosen character.

In an onstage interview during the 2011 MNCC host John Robertson and contestant Mel discussed the body shaping activities Mel used to achieve a taught flat stomach reminiscent of her chosen male character:

J: [...]You’ve said you like miso soup. What’s the story there with miso soup?
5.3. **BODY AS OBJECT IN BODY PROJECTS**

M: I used to drink like three glasses of Pepsi for breakfast but when I realised that I would have to do a costume that bares my stomach I thought ah yeah, better stop that. So I’ve cut out the Pepsi and replaced it with miso soup for breakfast instead so now I have a miso addiction instead of a Pepsi addiction [audience cheers]. But I’ve lost like an awful lot of weight so I’m happy [audience cheers].

Moments later, as part of the performance, the host presented the contestant with a bottle of Coke.

J: So you get right into that the minute this is done, darling!

M: I am not fitting into this costume tomorrow!

(MNCC Final 2011 Video Author’s Transcript)

Contestants’ and hosts’ performances onstage portrayed the cosplayer’s dieting activities as being primarily associated with the creation of that particular costume, not necessarily indicating that the cosplayer will incorporate dieting activities as part of her everyday body practices. The contestant’s sacrifice is portrayed as being for the purpose of cosplay.

In order to recreate a character’s visual look a cosplayer may also make semi–permanent alterations to their ‘everyday’ haircuts and styles. To outsiders, altering a hair style may seem a trivial matter. However, as the hair–styles of many anime, manga, science–fiction or videogame characters are frequently exaggerated or outlandish cosplayers seeking accuracy need to create and wear styles that would appear very distinctive if worn to an Australian workplace or school.

While many cosplayers temporarily change the appearance and/or texture of their hair for particular events using wigs, styling products and dyes, other cosplayers pursue longer–term hair projects, growing out, cutting, or bleaching their hair. These hair projects extend the cosplayer’s transformation activities out of the event time frame and into the everyday.

ACG cosplayer Ben described how on several occasions he (drastically) altered his nat-
urally dark hair to recreate the hairstyles of different characters:

Obi Wan Kenobi... I used to be ridiculously full-on, like years ago. I got my hair dyed. I went to a hair dresser and said, ‘Can you make my hair like this?’ I grew it specifically, grew a beard and stripped it away which killed like no man’s tomorrow. (Ben, Author’s Interview 2012)

In addition to the cost, commitment and physical pain he apparently underwent to achieve character-accurate hairstyles, Ben also reported feeling socially uncomfortable when his commitment to long-term hair projects necessarily forced him to wear some unusual styles in more ‘everyday’ contexts:

B: I’ll usually get really into it. I grew mutton chops. For this photo I grew some megas [very large Victorian-style whiskers] which is for the Olympia Fringe event, the first one. And I thought, well I’m about to shave these off, I’m going to take a photo of it. I got some weird looks. That’s the whole thing, context.

C: It’s all about context.

B: In the right clothes it looks great but out of the clothes I look like a freak. I get weird looks. (Ben, Author’s Interview 2012)

The examples above illustrate the association some cosplayers draw between longer term body projects and commitment to the practice of cosplay. Like bodybuilders and others who undertake body projects, cosplayers who choose to enact longer-term body transformations are rendering their bodies into an expression and representation of their commitment to a particular lifestyle. These ‘ridiculously full on’ semi-permanent transformations require the cosplayer to incorporate body transformation activities into their everyday lives, a physical commitment to cosplay aesthetics of accuracy which may be deemed out of place in other non-cosplay social contexts. These cosplayers are visibly choosing to value bodily accuracy even at the risk of physical and social discomfort. In competitions and online these cosplayers are sometimes highlighted as models of cosplay heroism (Okabe, 2012) who have dedicated themselves to the practice. Crossley (2005) has argued that body modifications and other body projects can be performed.
reflexively, as deliberate acts. Here, cosplay body projects are portrayed not only as de-
liberate acts, but as heroic acts, a practitioner’s dedication to visual accuracy inscribed
on their body.

5.4 Body as Object in Social Dressing Activities

While some cosplayers engage in longer–term body transformation activities the ma-
majority of transformative activities undertaken by cosplayers are performed in the days
and hours prior to an event such as a convention or photo shoot. To non–cosplaying
friends and family I would sometimes jokingly describe my preparation activities be-
fore a cosplay event as my “Clark Kent Superman” routine. Like the Man of Steel and
his mythologised transformations in phone booths, cosplay event preparation activities
typically take place in ‘backstage’ (Goffman, 1990) spaces at cosplayers’ homes, at
friends’ houses, in hotel or hostel rooms, in the toilets of conventions, or even some-
times inside a parked car. These preparation activities can take any time between fifteen
minutes and several hours depending on the complexity of the cosplayer’s outfit.

Makeup application, I usually allow about two to three hours beforehand
for makeup application alone. Then you also have to figure out, ‘Oh I’m
in my costume and ready to go... Hmm... How can I drive there in this?’
(Renee, Author’s Interview 2012)

For some cosplayers their body transformation activities may be restricted to the don-
ning of a particular garment and footwear or may extend to activities such as wearing
specialised undergarments, body painting, make–up, wigs or hair styling and/or the ap-
plication of latex prosthetics and coloured contact lenses. For many cosplayers these
preparatory body transformation activities act as a kind of threshold ritual allowing the
cosplayer to prepare themselves both mentally and physically for a day out at an event,
for stepping onto a public stage.

These preparation activities can be a collective experience for cosplayers as they often
meet before a performance event to dress together. In a similar manner to the activi-
ties of members of the British Goth subculture preparing themselves for a night out as
described by Hodkinson (2002), cosplay group preparation activities can themselves be
Figure 5.7: Dressing transformation sequence – #1
Figure 5.8: Dressing transformation sequence – #2
experienced as an exciting social event as group members provide assistance to each other and share in feelings of anticipation (or nervousness) before the public cosplay event. Goffman (1990) describes backstage spaces as areas where the performers engage in activities that strengthen their loyalties to one another and the group. This is frequently true of cosplayers getting ready together. As they prepare together for events, cosplayers socially reinforce the idea of the body as transformable object as they assist each other achieve transformations and teach transformation techniques.

During my fieldwork cosplay experiences cosplayers dressing together often looked to each other as a measure of appropriate levels of body transformation. I was helping cosplayers Julia and Jane prepare for a party. Both were dressed in costume when Jane took out a makeup palette and began using eyeshadows to colour her face green and create floral patterns around her eyes. Julia took immediate inspiration from this action and asked Jane if she could borrow some of her makeup to create designs on her own face. Despite the fact that the cosplayers had not planned or co–ordinated their costumes together until this point, dressing together with Jane helped to shape the assembly of Julia’s costume. Jane’s decision to incorporate makeup as part of her costume influenced and facilitated Julia’s decision to do the same.

The complicated designs of some costumes occasionally necessitate the assistance of another person to help dress the cosplayer. The social dressing and undressing of cosplayers’ bodies can place cosplayers in positions of considerable physical intimacy with one another, requiring them to touch each other’s bodies in ways that may be considered inappropriately familiar in more everyday contexts. Lacing another person’s corset, for example, requires the lacer to observe the cosplayer naked or clad in minimal underwear, the touching of skin and the moulding of flesh with the tightening of laces or clasps. In cosplay contexts I laced corsets for acquaintances and friends, who, in more everyday contexts I would never interact with on that level of physical intimacy. In this way, through tying or sewing each other into outfits, painting each other or styling hair, cosplayers effect transformations on each other’s bodies. Offstage group dressing practices reaffirm and strengthen social relationships between cosplayers but they also reinforce and reproduce the idea of the body as a mouldable object through the group re–enactment of body transformation practices.

Cosplayers may assist one another to shape or transform their bodies and may teach each other new transformative skills. Entwistle (2000) has identified dressing as a learned
practice. In interviews and casual conversations, cosplayers often described how they would seek assistance from fellow cosplayers. For example, Julia described to me how she visited Steve, a friend and extremely experienced cosplayer, before attending an Adelaide Zombie walk event as part of a cosplay group. Steve applied latex facial prosthetics to Julia’s face, enabling her to display gruesome and technically challenging visual effects she would have been unable to achieve herself.

In instances where cosplayers have similar levels of competency, shared preparation and dressing activities may serve as both learning and bonding experiences, especially in the case of shared failure or misadventure. Daniel recounted to me his experience of participating in the preparations of the hairstyle of a mutual friend, Aiden, for a cosplay event. The young men had visited the hairdresser together to get their hair cut especially for their respective cosplays. They then decided to dye Aiden’s hair in the confines of Daniel’s home to transform it from Aiden’s natural light brown to the dark black of his chosen character, “Aladdin” from the (1992) Disney animated film. As neither man was especially familiar or proficient with the application of packet hair-dye, an accident occurred and hair dye was applied to Aiden’s face. Both cosplayers tried numerous methods to remove the dye. Eventually both cosplayers ended up fully dressed in Daniel’s shower trying to scrub Aiden’s face. The unusual level of intimacy shared by the men and their struggles to master the skill of hair dyeing were presented as humorous by Daniel as he recounted the story to me. However, Daniel deemed the story to have a happy ending as Aiden’s face was eventually cleaned and his hair was an accurate colour for the cosplay event. The transformation was ultimately successful.

Dressing activities often enact and reinforce the concept of the body as a mouldable cosplay object. In these activities, cosplayers, alone or in groups, prepare their bodies for public performance, donning clothes, applying makeup and wigs. As these dressing activities are often social occasions, ideas about appropriate levels of body transformation are discussed and shared, and transformative competences are taught.

5.5 The Problem of the Painful Body

While cosplayers’ preparation practices enact the idea of the body as a mouldable object that can be transformed in the quest of achieving bodily accuracy, for many cosplayers
the experience of actually wearing a costume throughout the course of an event can reveal the structuring limitations of the body. The wearing of heavy, constricting garments and accessories regularly causes cosplayers to experience fatigue, overheating, dehydration and pain. Painful or uncomfortable sensations force performers to experience their bodies in new ways as they become consciously aware of a sense of embodiment (Aaltern, 2005; Wainwright and Turner, 2006). These experiences of embodiment pose serious challenges to cosplayer’s understandings of their bodies as transforming craft objects.

Personally, throughout my fieldwork activities I frequently found wearing cosplay a physically uncomfortable experience. From wearing a masked costume with poor visibility onto a Melbourne train, cosplaying in the heat of summer in Perth and Brisbane with make-up running with my sweat, to spending a day on my feet in stilettos or plastic Japanese traditional footwear, to enduring the constant itch of overheated wigs and prosthetic latex ears. Often after spending eight hours of a convention day in costume I would be exhausted, over-heated, and dehydrated with aching muscles. My list of minor discomforts was on the mild side of the spectrum of bodily discomfort experienced and endured by members of the cosplay community.

When chatting with other cosplayers at events they would often, unprompted, describe to me the feelings of discomfort they were currently experiencing. When cosplaying as a member of a group we would often attempt to work our activities around group members’ needs to rest, eat or adjust aspects of their costumes in the bathrooms. Despite their verbalised feelings of discomfort cosplayers I encountered rarely changed out of costume dress into more comfortable attire throughout the day, rather they removed particularly restrictive or uncomfortable items for periods at a time.

Similar to other practices such as martial arts (Spencer, 2009) and ballet (Aaltern, 2005; Turner and Wainwright, 2003) there is exists an idea within cosplay that pain and discomfort should be ignored or endured for the sake of aesthetic effect, in this instance accuracy. In many practices the experience of pain is viewed as a necessary aspect of the activity; the endurance of pain is heroic and provides evidence of the practitioner’s commitment to the practice (Wulff, 1998; Turner and Wainwright, 2003; Aaltern, 2005). This attitude towards pain is produced and supported through social contexts (Aaltern, 2005; Turner and Wainwright, 2003; Spencer, 2009). The experience of pain is mediated through the reactions or the anticipated reactions of others (Turner and Wainwright,
Figure 5.9: Daniel in pain (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)
The role of social contexts in shaping participants experiences of pain or discomfort was regularly evident at cosplay events. I was walking with a group of cosplayers through the streets of Adelaide for a photo shoot on a scorching summer’s day of over thirty–eight degrees Celsius. Walking alongside me, Daniel was dressed as “Captain Jack Harkness” from the science–fiction series Torchwood wearing woollen pants, heavy boots, a T–shirt underneath a long–sleeved cotton shirt, red braces and a full–length grey woollen trench coat. I was sweltering myself despite being more lightly dressed as “Ash” from the Pokémon anime series in shorts, T–shirt and cap, and I assumed he must have been quite uncomfortable as beads of perspiration were appearing on his forehead. I asked Daniel if he would at least consider taking off his trench coat. He replied no. I asked him why not and he replied,

You guys are all in costume. I don’t want to feel left out. I mean, if you take off your hat or something you’ll still be in character. Jack is the coat. Without the coat I’m just a man in suspenders. If Iron Man can still walk around in vacuum hydro–foil then I can wear my coat.

(Daniel, Author’s Fieldnotes 2012)

Daniel was uncomfortable but he decided to endure his costume to achieve solidarity with the group. His comments also compared his own experiences to imagined experiences of other cosplayers suffering and enduring more pain than himself. The pain–endurance capabilities of other cosplayers inspired his own reaction to his discomfort.

5.6 Body as Object in Competition Narratives

Aaltern (1997) in her study of professional ballet dancers argues that a similar attitude towards ignoring or enduring the body’s pain responses is instilled in would–be dancers through explicit instruction in dance training institutions and companies. The idea of that painful or uncomfortable body experiences should be ignored or endured by the cosplayer throughout the duration of an event is one that is reproduced through shared practice and learnt by newcomers to cosplay communities of practice. Cosplayers can
be exposed to the idea in ongoing discussions with friends and fellow cosplayers, in cosplay tutorials, forums and articles online, or in the context of cosplay panel discussions at conventions.

This concept is also actively and publicly performed in the context of cosplay competition interviews. Onstage, in front of audiences, cosplayers are interviewed by the competition’s MC or host about the creation of their costume and their experiences while wearing it. These interviews are often filmed by convention organisers and audience members and are displayed to wider audiences online.

During many competition interviews that I observed hosts and contestants would refer to the impact of the costume on the cosplayer’s body and contestants would publicly articulate their body experiences. The heaviness of props or costumes, the costume’s restriction on their body’s manoeuvrability, the heat or stuffiness of costumes or the cosplayer’s exhaustion after preparing the costume or performing a skit were common themes of these oral narratives.

H: [...] Now you were telling me backstage you’ve run into just a little smidgen of a problem with your costume.

C: [audibly panting] I’m incredibly hot.

H: We know that, next [crowd cheers]. You see Brisbane’s amazingly humid for cosplayers. You have sweat, yes?

C: I have a full bodysuit of neoprene which is the stuff they make [still audibly panting] wetsuits out of. Yeah, I’ve lost basically half my body weight. (MNCC Final 2010 Video Author’s Transcript)

As evident in the above example from the MNCC Final, in these performed narratives cosplay contestants simultaneously portray themselves as both embodied performers who experience pain and discomfort, and as cosplay masters, who are capable and devoted enough to withstand these feelings of discomfort in order to present a visually arresting and enjoyable cosplay performance. The performed narratives also enable the host and competing cosplayers to uncover and highlight competitor body feats that
would be invisible to the eyes and cameras of the audience.

The performance of the interview may also reveal to the audience cosplay body feats that took place earlier in time during the competitor’s preparation activities, in offstage contexts typically inaccessible to the audience. The struggles of the backstage are performed for the audience onstage. In the following example the host tells a story about pain previously endured by cosplayer Kathy, who after completing a vigorous acrobatic skit, at that moment was standing onstage on a pair of traditional Japanese merchant geta wooden stilt–like shoes:

H: [...] Now I just want to make a point, just right here, Kathy, who is currently standing up on those shoes - one, she’s had leg surgery, two, she sprained her ankle yesterday. It is a miracle that she can walk let alone in those shoes and do a flip in a fight scene. Ladies and gentlemen, a round of applause right about now for effort! [audience cheers].

(Host, MNCC Final 2011 Video Author’s Transcript)

In both examples the oral performances of the cosplayers’ experiences allow cosplayers to articulate their sensations of discomfort as well as their abilities to endure that discomfort, aspects of their cosplay performances which would not be evident to audiences and judges without this verbal articulation. In all instances described the performing cosplayers were onstage, visible to the audience, wearing detailed, accurate and complete costumes, and many had just moments prior performed skits involving expressions of body skills acrobatics, mime, quick–change routines. The juxtaposition of the magical and apparently effortless visual performances of the competing cosplayers with the stories of embodied pain and effort in their oral narratives, serves to enhance competing cosplayers’ image as masters. It demonstrates that the competitors can apparently overcome the demands of their bodies but they can also make it appear to the audience as if this struggle is not occurring.

While competitors’ narratives of pain endurance associate the abilities to shape one’s body and ignore pain with cosplay mastery, this idea is occasionally further reinforced by public statements by the hosts and judges of the competition.

During the first competition I personally competed in at AICon in 2011 I was publicly identified as a newcomer to the competition scene by my participation in the ‘New Blood’ category. After I described the physical sensation of the heaviness of my cos-
tume in an onstage interview one of the judges gave this public piece of advice to me and the audience:

J3: I don’t really have anything else to add but I do have kind of a slogan that I’ve come to live by as I’ve been cosplaying for longer and longer and that is, ‘if it doesn’t hurt you’re not cosplaying hard enough.’

(Judge 3, AiCon Competition 2011 Video Author’s Transcript)

In this comment the judge explicitly associated ideas of effort and amateurism with pain endurance. Cosplayers who care about their performances and wish to participate correctly should be willing to transform their bodies at the cost of pain and discomfort.

These performed discussions about pain and the body in competitions have the potential to reinforce the debate over body transformation within communities. In performing competition narratives prestigious individuals within the community, including experienced competitors and judges, communicate their views to newcomers and outsiders. The transformation of the body and the endurance of pain are portrayed as acts of cosplay heroism in front of an audience. These views are redistributed to a wider audience as filmed performances are uploaded and viewed online.

### 5.7 Challenging the Body as Costume Object

However, as in other ethnographic contexts ideas about the dressed body in cosplay communities of practice are not uniform but are instead constantly negotiated and challenged. While the idea that the body should be transformed for the sake of accuracy, even at the expense of the cosplayer’s comfort, is enacted in cosplayer’s body projects, dressing rituals and competition narratives, it is important to note that a counter discourse, that cosplayer bodies do not have to be completely transformed to visually match the bodies of chosen characters, is also promoted by practitioners in online articles and forums, and panels.

Indeed, while the ideal of the transformable body may be prevalent in Australian communities of practice, in practice transformation of the body can be difficult, painful, or even impossible, as many cosplayers themselves recognise. Anime, manga, videogame
and science fiction bodies are fantasy bodies and therefore it is impractical or even dan-
gerous for cosplayers to attempt to recreate a character’s physique exactly.

One critique of the body accuracy idea identifies the discourse as a form of gatekeeping
as it restricts the participation of participants whose body types are not well represented
in inspirational texts. Bodies in source texts for cosplay - manga, comic–books, anime,
videogames, science–fiction and fantasy films and television programmes - are, in the
majority, young, white or fair skinned, tall, slender, physically fit, completely able–
bodied and can be considered physically attractive within the parameters of specific
genre conventions (Napier, 2005).

As many cosplayers argue, in blogs, articles, forum posts and in conversation, if visual
accuracy is the primary goal of cosplay activities then cosplayers with seldom repre-
sented body types, cosplayers whose bodies do not or cannot be made to match these
characters, are severely restricted in the types and number of cosplays they can per-
form.

Malaysian–born cosplayer Santhosh discusses this issue:

C: I know this is a little controversial within cosplay but how much do you
think a person needs to physically look like the character?

S: That’s debateable. Take for example, me, I’m not Australian. I’m not a
white Australian. I’m Indian, so to find characters that have brown skin and
dark hair it’s actually quite hard. I guess it’s debateable. Probably the cos-
tume itself because that’s what the anime is, the face not so much because
you could never look like that. (Santhosh, Author’s Interview 2012)

As many cosplayers have argued in blogs and forum posts, strict adherence to bodily
accuracy in cosplay practices has the potential to replicate structural inequalities perpe-
trated in contexts beyond the community of practice. Cosplayers of the ‘wrong’ race,
body shape or gender may be restricted in their participation in the practice.

In 2013, an illustration by American cartoonist Alexandra Dal was shared on Facebook
by a number of my cosplaying friends and acquaintances. The image depicts two fe-
male cosplayers with larger, curvy body shapes smiling and interacting while dressed
as “Cheetara” and “Lara Croft”, respectively. Two male cosplayers are shown watching
them looking unimpressed. One, dressed as “Wolverine” comments, ‘Ugh, it should be illegal to cosplay outside your body type’. His companion, dressed as “Kratos” exclaims, ‘FAIL’. Both male cosplayers are also depicted as being heavier and non-muscular, inaccurate to the characters’ body types.

The sharing of this image promoted lively discussion on the issue of bodies in cosplay. Many commentators identified with the satirical content in the cartoon, condemning reactions of cosplayers who behaved like the male characters and expressing anger and frustration that this form of gatekeeping seemed to be particularly targeted against female participants. The discrimination against cosplayers ‘playing against type’ was read by some cosplayers on Facebook as an extension of broader forms of gender discrimination.

Participants with under-represented body types are forced choose how they will practically negotiate concepts of bodily accuracy. While he acknowledges the restrictions of a pro-bodily accuracy position, it is a position that Santhosh still supports. To negotiate this view in his own practices, Santhosh tactically chooses to cosplay characters that are masked such as mecha suits or character who visually match his own personal appearance.

S: [...] Of course it would be a plus if you looked like them. That’s why I chose my first costume to be “Kaname Tousen” because he’s brown-skinned and he had long hair. I thought, ah he fits me! A lot of my friends said, go for it! You’d pull off the part easily. When I went to AVCon everyone was like, ‘Oh my god it’s Tousen! He looks exactly like him!

(Santhosh, Author’s Interview 2012)

Other cosplayers take a rather different approach, performing characters whose designs do not match their body type and refusing to alter their bodies to match. Examples of this include cosplayers choosing to portray characters who are a different ethnicity, a different body shape, or an alternative gender. On blogs and websites some cosplayers portray this choice as an inherently political decision.

In a blog post that was linked and shared by several of my cosplaying friends within the local community, American cosplayer Chaka Cumberbatch discussed her decision to cosplay as non-black characters. She reported receiving racist comments and accusations that her cosplays were not accurate as she was cosplaying characters whose skin
But my skin color is something I can’t change, nor would I if I had the ability. I love the skin I was born in, and I won’t apologize, make excuses or work around it for anyone’s benefit beyond my own. One of my good friends (and cosplay idols) does a killer Wonder Woman and Batgirl where she prominently features her natural hair almost as a centerpiece. Seriously, a Wonder Woman and a Batgirl rocking a full head of gorgeous, natural curls. Who could be mad at that?

In a parallel to Strathern’s (1979) account of the Hageners’ attitudes towards body decoration, these cosplayers see the external body as equivalent to an internal ‘self’. According this view cosplayers perceive physical characteristics such as race or body shape as intrinsic to their conception of self; their physical body and adornments is not merely an expression of self, it is the self. Altering one’s skin colour or body shape for a cosplay is here viewed as a betrayal of self. By choosing to ignore bodily accuracy in character choice, cosplayers like Chaka simultaneously protest the limited representation of body types in source texts, and personalise pre-existing character designs by adapting them to incorporate their own cosplayer bodies. Instead of actively playing against type other cosplayers, like Renee, may deliberately choose to perform costumes that emphasise their non-mainstream body type:

I like characters that are a bit sexy that I can flaunt so that’s where my burlesque style comes in. I play to my assets. If I was a tiny little stick thin skinny dancer then I would be able to wear a lot more different things. I play to how things will make me feel so if I’m not going to be comfortable being a character then I won’t do it. I’ve always loved Jessica Rabbit. I’ve loved the figure and I’ve got such an hourglass figure that I can pull it off.

(Renee, Author’s Interview 2012)

In performing her “Jessica Rabbit” cosplay Renee negotiates accuracy with self-expression and a celebration of her body as an aspect of her self.

Another challenge to the idea that cosplayers should significantly transform their bodies for the sake of accuracy comes from within the practice’s own values system. Some
practitioners argue that cosplayers should not have to alter their bodies to achieve accuracy if doing so would in any way impede the cosplayers’ ability to enjoy and express themselves in performance.

J: [...] If someone loves it enough to make it, then that’s it. If you can see that they’ve worked really hard or if they’re really enjoying wearing it, even if they’ve bought it as long as they’re happy. I don’t really care only one exception: fur suits and flip-flops. (Julia, Author’s Interview 2012)

Julia’s comments here explicitly challenge accuracy as cosplay’s primary aesthetic and ethical value. Proponents of this view often emphasise the idea that cosplay should be an expression of self and love of character, technique or text.

This view was publically expressed and performed by several elite cosplayers who were presenting introductory panels. In an AVCon panel the presenters spent some time discussing the idea of bodily accuracy. In their speech the presenters adopted a rhetorical strategy of addressing a non-present opposing other, ‘some people will say…’ The male presenter argued that cosplayers should disregard the bodied nature of their chosen characters - tall people should be able to cosplay short characters, fat - thin, male - female. He recounted a personal anecdote where he and another male friend selected characters that were opposite to their own contrasting heights. It was not ‘accurate’ but the panellists still perceived it to be good cosplay because all performers enjoyed themselves. Again, in these discussions the value of self-expression and the value of amateurism are promoted as more important or authentic to cosplay than the value of accuracy.

5.8 Conclusion: Body Debates and the Recreation of Practice

Exploring the dressed body in cosplay again highlights the heterogeneity of the practice. Cosplay, as it is practiced in Australia, is not centered upon one recognised set of formalised body techniques. Instead cosplayers can employ an incredibly diverse range of body transformation effects. While these body expressions may appear diverse they are far from chaotic. Body transformation activities are structured and positioned in relation to an ongoing debate over the role of the body in cosplay.
Theories of social practice and anthropological perspectives on dress and embodiment have long established the potentially generative and productive role of the body in culture. In Bourdieu’s (1990) account of the habitus the body is depicted as a means through which cultural ideals and values are reproduced through being inscribed upon the bodies of practitioners. Expanding on Bourdieu, many anthropological and sociological accounts of practice have argued that practitioner bodies are shaped and disciplined so as to reproduce the values of the practice; practitioner bodies are shaped into dancer bodies (Aaltern, 2005) or doctor bodies (Rice, 2010).

However, within the practice of cosplay in Australia it is not a set of established bodily techniques which is reproduced but instead a debate over the role of the body in the practice. The debate itself is culturally productive. Negotiations of different ideas of bodily accuracy inspire different forms of body transformation activities, and the creation of textual products such as blogs, panels and tutorials where cosplayers enact and discuss different notions of accuracy. Cosplayer bodies may appear very diverse and cosplayers may hold different views about what their bodies can and should be, but these ideas, performances and products are all situated within the framing of this practice–wide debate in which bodies are seen as craft objects or alternatively as aspects of a distributed self.

At the heart of the debate over the role of the body is a conflict over the primary value and purpose of cosplay itself. As in many other cultural contexts, dressed bodies in cosplay are sites of negotiation of competing values. In dieting to look like a character, in helping another cosplayer transform their body, in choosing a character whose appearance matches their own, in refusing to alter their body, in talking about their choices and activities online and in competitions, cosplayers negotiate the role of the body in cosplay and consequentially the nature of the practice itself. Cosplayers’ dressed bodies can be seen as the primary site of negotiation of these values but there are many other contexts throughout the practice where this debate is contested in material practice and discourse including social dressing rituals, convention panels, competition performances and online blogs. Through engaging in these material and discursive practices cosplayers are debating the question, is accuracy the most important value in cosplay? Is the production of visually accurate embodied recreations more important than comfort, safety and egalitarianism? Is personal identification with the character and self–expression a more authentic form cosplay? What is cosplay all about?
5.8. CONCLUSION

This state of uncertainty does not seem to paralyse communities of practice. Instead it appears to be generative as the debate itself inspires countless cultural products: blogs, panel performances, and dressing activities. Individual practitioners must negotiate their own position within the debate. This chapter has demonstrated that individual cosplayers can hold nuanced attitudes towards the debate. The individual negotiations of cosplayers creates further diversity within the practice as cosplayers develop their own positions towards the debate and negotiate these views in their body practices.

This debate over the role of bodies in the practice renders cosplay as distinct from many other costuming practices. Cosplay theorists have identified accuracy or mimicry of an original design as an element that is absent from other spectacular dress practices including Lolita and Steampunk (Truong, 2013). Defining accuracy and debating bodily accuracy are activities which uniquely concern cosplayers. To be a cosplayer therefore, a practitioner does not have to acquire a restricted set of bodily techniques but instead needs to situate their body practices within the framing of a community–wide debate. The role of uncertainty, contestation and negotiation in cosplay practices will be further explored in the following chapter in which I shall explore the ways in which cosplayers and audiences negotiate multiple participation–frameworks within cosplay performances.
Chapter 6

Playing in Costume, Framing the Performance

The photograph in Figure 6.1 depicts two cosplayers dressed as characters from the *Dynasty Warriors* (Koei 1997) videogame series performing a sword fight with prop weapons. Aware of my presence and the other photographers who are standing out of frame, the cosplayers are adopting in-character martial stances. Another member of the same *Dynasty Warriors* cosplay group is standing nearby, out of character, fiddling with a plastic bag. Photographers and other costumed and non-costumed attendees are standing and sitting nearby. The shot captures some of the details of their elaborate, handcrafted props and costumes. Also visible in the frame are more mundane, out of character items such as a pair of shoes, a backpack and a plastic lunch box.

It is Sunday afternoon at A VCon in the foyer of the Adelaide Convention Centre, several hours before the cosplay competition is due to start in the main hall. The foyer is a strangely angular space that connects the two main areas of the convention: the large exhibitor hall, and the somewhat labyrinthine building that houses the auditoriums used for screenings, the smaller panel rooms and the main hall itself.

In this foyer space, between exhibitor hall and the auditoriums, convention attendees are ‘hanging out’. If this was Melbourne’s Manifest at the Flemington showgrounds where the buildings used by the convention are spread out across an outdoor space, convention attendees would be lounging on the grass or sitting at some of the few available pic-
Figure 6.1: *Dynasty Warriors*
nic tables, but this is AVCon so the attendees are perched on the faux–leather seating, leaning against walls, sitting on the grey carpet or just milling about.

To outsiders it may appear strange that convention attendees, having paid thirty–five dollars to attend the event, an event with traders’ halls and artists’ alleys, where screenings, panels and competitions are scheduled throughout the day, should choose to spend a portion of their time in an area with no organised activities. However, to those who pause in this space for even fifteen minutes it becomes clear that this unclassified, unscheduled space is a site of important interactions for convention attendees, especially cosplayers. In the foyer and down its adjoining corridors are cosplayers standing, sitting, chatting, ‘bitching’, resting and posing for photographs.

This is a space where serious cosplay photographers and convention attendees alike can interact with cosplayers at close proximity. Unlike the auditoriums and panel rooms where the boundaries between competing cosplayers or panellists and their audiences are clearly spatially segregated, here in the foyer cosplayers and other attendees can approach and chat to one another, take close–up photographs and see the details on costumes and props.

A young man dressed as “Spiderman” is wrapping convention attendees in Gladwrap. There are squeals of mock–horror as man with long plastic tentacles attached to his arms deliberately brushes the bodies of passers–by. Several young Naruto cosplayers are seated nearby, eating hot chips from paper cups. Towering over them all, a “Jack Skellington” cosplayer, from Disney’s (1993) The Nightmare Before Christmas, is teetering about on stilts that are hidden beneath the fabric of his elongated trousers.

There is much to see and plenty of ways to see it. Convention attendees gaze at one another with their naked eyes, through the lenses of their SLRs, on the screens of tablets and smart–phones. A photographer snaps a picture of a Dalek. The cosplayer hidden deep within the body of the costume can barely see anything at all. Across the room a non–costumed attendee asks a cosplayer in Elizabethan–style finery how she achieved the detailed embroidery on her dress.

This chapter focuses on ‘hallway performances’, largely informal and barely structured performances that take place in the liminal spaces of popular culture conventions, corridors, foyers and courtyards (Lunning, 2011). These performances are temporary assemblages of costumed performers, non–costumed and costumed spectators, and pho–
Harkening back to the example of the multiple “Daenerys Targaryens” that opened the thesis, hallway performances can be seen as a microcosm of the practice of cosplay itself. From these dynamic, heterogenous, and ephemeral performances practitioners must create sense and meaning.

When cosplayers, photographers and other spectators observe and participate in these hallway performances, they must ‘frame’ these actions, determine the status of all participants in relation to the performance, outline the appropriate conduct for those participating and provide a particular context in which the meanings of the performance can be interpreted (Bateson, 1955; Goffman, 1990, 1981). Giddens (1984, p.87) identifies framing as an important aspect of meaning–making within a practice as frames act to categorise, regulate and sanction particular activities in particular contexts.

Previous explorations of cosplay performances have tended to focus on the performance of character (Lunning, 2011), gender identities (Galbraith, 2013), sexual identities (Gn, 2011), and subcultural or fan identities (Rahman et al., 2012). In this chapter I will explore the framing of three interconnected types of hallway performances: activities that are framed as ‘in–character’ performances where the cosplayer acts in a way that references an original character or text; actions that are framed as performances of ‘sexiness’, a nebulous quality associated with desirability and attractiveness; and performances of craftsperson identities. In the semi–structured spaces of convention hallways performers and spectators shift between these ‘participation–frameworks’ (Goffman, 1990, 1981). A cosplayer may present as a giant robot in one moment and a skilled armourer in the next.

However, within the contexts of hallway performances framing often becomes a very difficult task due the unstructured fluidity and dynamism of the performance space. Audiences and performers are shifting roles and the cues for framing, verbal, embodied and material, are themselves unstable. The more loosely structured settings of hallway performances may allow some participants to achieve success and recognition but may cause others embarrassment or anxiety.

Schieffelin (1996) has identified performances as socially risky activities. Hallway performances carry a high level of risk as the difficulty in framing these dynamic performances means that performer intentions and audience interpretations may not cohere. Expanding upon concepts of negotiation in performance identified in other ethnographic
contexts (Cowan, 1990; Hughes-Freeland, 2007; Mendoza, 2000), this chapter explicitly portrays meaning–making in performance as potentially fraught process as the meanings of performance acts are created through the intentions of the performer, the materialised performance, and the interpretation of the audience. The potential for framework slippage and misinterpretation abound. Exploring hallway performances of character, craftsmanship and sexiness, this chapter will demonstrate how performers and spectators alike attempt to draw order out of the apparent chaos that are convention corridor performances.

### 6.1 Performances in Times and Spaces

Hallway performances of the type described by Lunning (2011) tend to occur at popular culture conventions and other specialty cosplay events. In Australia anime, manga, videogame and more generalist popular culture conventions typically take place at convention centres such as the Adelaide Convention Centre or the Sydney Convention Centre – large permanent building complexes designed for the staging of conferences, trade fairs or commercial exhibitions that include purpose–built auditoriums, meeting rooms and exhibition spaces, or alternatively at showgrounds – even larger complexes, originally designed for the staging of agricultural shows, which typically include large exhibition halls, auditoriums and outdoor arenas. Historically, many of Australia’s current not–for–profit conventions were originally held at university campuses as organisation committees were often closely associated with particular university clubs or associations (Norris and Bainbridge, 2009). Other smaller events featuring cosplay are often held in public parks and botanic gardens or even in shopping precincts such as Adelaide’s Harajuku no Yoko evenings held in the city’s Central Markets.

Most events will feature formalised cosplay performance occasions such as competitions or panels which are usually staged in pre–arranged locations like auditoriums. On the fringes of these formal performances are hallway performances taking place in hallways, foyers, car parks and courtyards. The liminal nature of these spaces creates and heightens the ambiguity of the performances which take place within them.

Space plays a strong role in defining the contexts of a performance (Giddens, 1984; Turner, 1979; Goffman, 1990; Edensor, 2001; Ahearn, 2012). In relation to tourist per-
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Figure 6.2: Map of AVCon from 2011
formances, Edensor (2001) identifies different types of tourism performance spaces or ‘theatres’ ‘enclavic spaces’ strongly structured and regulated for particular activities and ‘heterogeneous spaces’ ‘multi–purpose’ spaces that allow for multiple activities to performed and allow easy intermingling between tourists and non–tourists (64).

Enclavic spaces (Edensor, 2001) are certainly present at Australian pop culture convention events. These spaces are structured so as to imply a formalised demarcation between audience and performer: panel rooms, screening rooms, and stages. Interactions between audience and performer in these spaces are ideally highly controlled. Audiences may applaud, comment, ask questions or move around the space only at particular moments in the performance, and these interactions are initiated and permitted either by the performer herself or by convention organisers or volunteers who may act as enforcers.

Time in these spaces is also structured. Schedules, printed and digital, and signs on doors and walls indicate that particular events are supposed to take place in these spaces during allocated time periods which have been scrupulously planned in advance by the Event Co–ordinator of the convention and his team. Ideally, a convention attendee should be able to visit these spaces at any given time during the convention and know which particular performance will be taking place there.

In contrast corridors, courtyards, hallways, and car parks are ‘heterogeneous spaces’ (Edensor, 2001). These are the threshold spaces, spaces to be passed through on the way from one timetabled or purposed space to another.In convention booklets, maps and websites they are not usually ascribed a particular function in relation to the meaningful purposes of the convention event. Due to their nature as threshold spaces all participants in the convention pass through them during the course of the event cosplayers, traders, volunteers, photographers, members of organising committees, security guards and guests. While these spaces are not formally organised by convention organising committees they are spaces that are both amorphous and structured, and are sites of interactions that are both flexible and formalised.

The threshold nature of hallway spaces gives rise to a number of shifts as things in these spaces move from one state to another. One shift that occurs in these spaces is the delineation between backstage and front–stage. Goffman (1981) has argued of television studios that the front–stage is wherever the camera lens is pointing and this analogy can
be usefully applied to informal convention spaces. In these areas a cosplayer can enact an in–character performance in front of a photographer before shifting to eat a bucket of chips several minutes later, often with the photographer still nearby.

Another is the constant changing of roles between spectators and performers (Goffman, 1981). Unlike the formalised conditions of cosplay competitions (see Chapter 7) where the boundaries between performers and audience are firmly established, the lack of formal spatial demarcation in hallway spaces means that spectators and cosplayers can intermingle in close proximity. Spectators can photograph cosplayers close–up, ask cosplayers questions, chat, embrace them, step on the trains of their dresses and cloaks. Cosplayers can observe and interact with one another, pose together, see the details of their costumes and props. All those who move through these spaces can observe the actions of those around them, and one’s own role in the action may be constantly changing.

This constant shifting between roles and the demarcation of backstage and frontstage
spaces makes it difficult for performers and spectators to frame hallway cosplay performances (Truong, 2013). Expanding on Truong’s (2013) insight, I would argue that in the face of these difficulties cosplayers and spectators alike engage in ongoing interpretations and negotiations of hallway performances. Accounts of dress and performance practices in other ethnographic contexts have highlighted that the meanings of dress in performance can be highly ambiguous require ongoing negotiation (Bridgwood, 1995). In performance these negotiations may occur between performer and spectator as performers’ intentions are interpreted by audiences (Ahearn, 2012; Schieffelin, 1996). The performer herself may also internally negotiate various values and motivations, weighing self–expression against community aesthetics or expectations (Bridgwood, 1995; Cowan, 1990; Hughes-Freeland, 2007).

These negotiations may be pleasurable but can also cause anxiety for both performers and spectators (Bridgwood, 1995; Cowan, 1990; Schieffelin, 1996). With the constant shifting between different participant–frameworks and the different roles of participants there is the constant danger that a performance may be misinterpreted (Schieffelin, 1996, 1998; Goffman, 1981; Bateson, 1955). A performer may lack the competency to communicate their intended message to their audience or to produce the desired effect; a spectator may lack the knowledge or inclination to interpret the performance or to participate in the event in the ‘appropriate’ manner (Schieffelin, 1996). A performance is therefore always enacted at the risk of failure (Schieffelin, 1996). The compulsion to avoid failure and the demand for self–surveillance to ensure that their performance is cohesive and ‘correct’ can cause the performer to experience some level of anxiety (Cowan, 1990; Edensor, 2001).

In preparing for conventions, cosplayers often express both excitement and trepidation at the prospect of showcasing their costumes. As participants in hallway performances move between different spaces and roles they also shift between different types of performances, or ‘participation frameworks’ (Goffman, 1990). Shifting between in–character performances and performances of craftsmanship, the cosplayer is always at risk of having their performance misinterpreted or alternatively framed by spectators.
6.2 Getting Into Character

One of the most distinctive types of hallway performances are in–character performances. Within convention hallway spaces, courtyards and corridors cosplayers can often be seen enacting the role of the characters that their costumes materially represent (Lunning, 2011; Rahman et al., 2012). These performances are usually physical with the cosplayer mimicking the stances, gestures, gaits, and facial expressions that are considered recognisable or representative of the character, and sometimes verbal with the cosplayer calling out key ‘catchphrases’ or reciting lines of dialogue.

Acting within this participation–framework, the practices of spectators and performers are considered meaningful in the ways that they relate to specific texts videogames, television programmes, films, anime, manga or Western comics that are known and celebrated within the cosplay and wider convention–attending community. The practice of cosplay, in this context, is understood as fan practice, a material and performed expression of the cosplayer’s identification with, and/or appreciation of a particular character or text. Referring to Gell’s (1998) model of the ‘art nexus’ wherein objects gain meaning and affective properties through their relationship with other objects, source texts here act as ‘prototypes’ which are indexed by cosplay costumes and performances.

Academic and fan literature can often be guilty of fixating on in–character performances at conventions, emphasising this type of performance to the extent that outsiders to the practice may come to believe that most cosplayers spend the entire duration of an event participating in this framework (Lunning, 2011; Rahman et al., 2012). Cosplayers do not typically spend the whole of their time at conventions in–character but rather shift in and out of this framework at a moment’s notice.

I took the photo sequence depicted in Figures 6.5, 6.6 and 6.7 at AVCon in 2012. I was walking with a party of cosplayers in the foyer in the hope of seeing and photographing other performances when I encountered this cosplayer and her two attendants. I asked her if I could take a picture and she consented, almost immediately adopting the posture of holding her two props. I began taking shots from a little distance and in the few moments between each of these images one non–costumed attendant on the ground darted close to the cosplayer’s body to arrange the hem of her kimono while another quickly reached to position a giant purple painted fan behind her head. To my side,
Figure 6.4: *Sengoku Basara* cosplayer
CHAPTER 6. PLAYING IN COSTUME, FRAMING THE PERFORMANCE

Figure 6.5: Fan sequence - photo #1
Figure 6.6: Fan sequence - photo #2
Figure 6.7: Fan sequence - photo #3
another photographer had just begun to shoot the same cosplayer. In the last image the cosplayer’s eyes glance towards him.

The camera often acts as a cue to the cosplayer to initiate an in–character performance. Throughout my fieldwork I attempted to photograph cosplayers at conventions and other events in ‘out of character’ moments. Except through sheer accident this was rarely successful. At Adelaide’s Oz Comic–Con in 2012, for example, I attempted to photograph some fursuit cosplayers who were encircled by a ring of cosplay photographers. My intention was to capture the stances of the photographers and the cosplayers from a distance in order to explore embodied photographic practices at conventions. I stood to one side hoping to capture the whole scene, behind a huddle of photographers, crouching and standing, all pointing their lenses at the cosplayers. However, the photographers noticed my presence behind them and politely moved out of the frame so that I could have a clear shot of the cosplayer unimpeded by the intrusive ‘noise’ of photographer bodies. Noticing the presence of another photographer, a cosplayer turned her body directly towards me to give me a front–on shot and enacted an in–character pose, raising her taloned paws. These actions took place in the matter of seconds.

For in–character cosplay performances to be successful a number of elements need to cohere (Goffman, 1990): the cosplayer’s dress and embodied performance need to be recognisable to spectators. For this to occur, performing cosplayers need to have the fan–knowledge, craft–knowledge and bodily skills to create recognisable performances and spectators need to have the fan–knowledge to recognise these performances. In this way, in–character performances are only rendered successful when both intentions of the performer and the interpretations of the spectators are aligned.

For the performer the costume itself is usually considered to be the greatest aid in the creation of in–character performances. The transformative effect of some costume parts upon the body (as explored in Chapter 5) physically cause cosplayers’ bodies to resemble those of the characters they are portraying. However, for cosplayers the transformative effect of costumes may also occur on a symbolic level. As with masks in traditional ritual settings (e.g. Mendoza (2000)) cosplay costumes may give cosplayers permission to take on the persona of the character:

C: What does it feel like to wear the Captain Jack costume?
Figure 6.8: Cat and Rabbit
D: Umm well, it’s like putting on Captain Jack, himself. I’m already kind of flippant and fun, I would like to think, but when you put on the coat it’s kind of a license to be a bit more Captain Jack and to make sexual innuendo about everything. (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

While in–character performances may appear spontaneous, accurate in–character performances can require a considerable amount of offstage research work on the part of the cosplayer. As with the costume assembly process, research for an in–character performance often involves re–watching, reading, or playing the text or searching for further references online to identify and collect the character’s well–known physical poses and spoken phrases.

While the intentions and skills of the individual cosplay performer are an important element in determining the meaning and success of a cosplay performance act, cosplay performances are intrinsically social activities and require the participation of others. Cosplayers may perform as individuals but frequently they also perform as members of a group or ‘team’ (Goffman, 1990). Team performances are often enacted by groups of cosplayers who attend convention events together, dressed as characters from the same text or franchise. These pre–planned cosplay groups often require considerable offstage organisation on the part of participating cosplayers. Team members must delegate roles and assist others to create or complete their outfits ensuring that all members of the group, novices and masters, are able to be costumed to a uniform standard. Cosplay spectators often told me that they particularly enjoyed large group cosplays and in the hallways and corridors of convention events these groups were usually surrounded by spectators and photographers.

In team performances cosplayers are able to create images and sequences that represent the characters from the text interacting with one another. These performances may canonically reference the text characters who are threatening in the text may behave aggressively towards their teammates; characters who are in romantic relationships in the text may pose together in intimate clinches or they may playfully satirise or invert the canonical text “Darth Vader” may provide hugs; characters who are not romantically linked in the text, often characters of the same gender, may be portrayed in passionate embraces.

Team cosplay performances may be the result of meticulous planning or may happen
spontaneously as cosplayers happen upon other cosplayers performing as characters from the same text. Walking the hallways with other cosplayers we would often spot a related character in the crowd and approach them to chat and pose together for a picture.

D: [...] there have been some fantastic Daleks and some great Tardis things and whenever I see Captain Jacks I like to have pictures with them but it’s a part of the whole cosplay group thing where you go and find all your other people and go and photo with them.

C: So you try and find all the other people in your series?

D: We kind of gravitate towards each other anyway...

(Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

Occasionally, cosplayers performing characters from unrelated texts may team up to present a performance together, often with the express purpose of creating performances or images that achieve the mash–up found in other fan works such as fan fiction, Anime Music Videos (AMVs) and cross–over fan art, whereby unrelated characters are playfully mixed together in a ‘mash–up’ to create a joke or provide some form of commentary upon each other (Booth, 2012). In this photograph taken at AVCon 2012, an “Ezio”, the title character from the game Assassin’s Creed II is enacting the assassination of the villainous “Bane”, from the DC Batman franchise. The cosplayers are each performing in–character, speculating as to how their characters would react to the fantasy scenario.

My own experiences and the narratives of other cosplayers who participated in team cosplay performances destabilises the idea of the individual performer’s intentions as the most important element of a performance. Goffman (1990) has argued that for team performances to be successful there must be coherence, with all members performing their appropriate parts. The “Ezio” and “Bane” photograph would not have existed if both performers had been unwilling to participate. Successful group performances depend on the willingness of cosplayers to adopt complimentary roles.

Perhaps the most pointed example of this situation occurs when two cosplayers interact
Figure 6.9: Daniel and “Dalek”
Figure 6.10: “Ezio” and “Bane”
who are performing as the same characters, as there can be confusion over who is to adopt which role. Who is the character? Who is the spectator? How can they perform together? I observed one exchange between two “Captain Jack Harkness” cosplayers when Daniel met another “Jack” at AVCon 2012. Daniel claimed that at the start of the encounter he felt uncomfortable as he did not know what to say and he felt that the other cosplayer had a superior costume in terms of accuracy. However, a compromise was reached as the cosplayers began to role-play what would happen if the character happened to meet a second version of himself:

C: What did you guys talk about?

D: Mostly what Captain Jack would do if he met himself in the Torchwood world which we decided was sexing. (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

The two cosplayers had their photographs taken, posing together and in this way, through their verbally-created fantasy situation of the existence of two “Captain Jacks”, they were able to quickly negotiate roles in a performance context.

Cosplayers are not the only participants in hallway cosplay who renegotiate roles. Spectatorship itself can be considered a form of social performance and spectators often assume performative roles in cosplay performances. In the hallways and corridors non-costumed convention attendees often interact with cosplayers as if they are the characters they are portraying, calling them by the character’s name, pretending to be frightened or intimidated by threatening characters such as Daleks or Cybermen, petting cosplayers in fur suits as if they were, in fact, animals, asking favourite characters for hugs and posing alongside cosplayers in photographs as if they were tourists posing with costumed mascots at a theme park. As mentioned previously, the in-character performances of cosplayers are regularly initiated or inspired by spectators explicitly seeking out performances.

Apart from very young children who accompany their parents and siblings to the events, spectators are well aware that the robots, wolves, goddesses and aliens that are walking about the convention halls are costumed fans, and are ‘playing along’ with a kind of knowing wink enjoying the illusion while simultaneously being aware that the illusion is a construction of the cosplayers. Indeed, the creation and sustaining of the illusion involves some level of participation and performance on the part of non-cosplaying
spectators. I observed a particularly strong example of spectator performances in Adelaide at two separate convention events where a local male cosplayer dressed as Spiderman rolled other convention attendees in Gladwrap, creating the visual illusion that he had entrapped the attendees with spider’s web, and then posed with them for photographs.

Convention attendees that participated in this performance usually performed the part of the terrified, trapped victim and cosplayers who also consented to be Gladwrapped would often attempt to react ‘in character’ to their situation. These Gladwrap “Spiderman” performances took place in the halls and foyers of the conventions, usually with an encircling crowd of photographers and other spectators who would often shout suggestions for poses to the performers. The illusions were therefore created through an assemblage of elements: the “Spiderman” cosplayer, his costume and embodied performance, the prop of the Gladwrap which was interpreted by the audience as spider’s web, the embodied performance of the ‘victim’ and the directions and reactions of the observing crowd.

In order for the ‘correct’ assembly of these elements, all participants had to possess the shared knowledge of the Marvel comic book character “Spiderman”, his appearance and his skills. It is only with this knowledge that the actors know appropriate expressions and poses; that objects like Gladwrap can be understood to be spider’s web; and the meaning of the performance can be understood.

Recognisability is an essential element for a successful in–character performance. Cosplayers often explicitly related audience identification of their chosen character to performance success.

   No one’s going, ‘What’s that blue turtle thing?’ I hear people calling out, “Squirtle!” and I know that I’ve done it, I’m a success.

   (Daniel, Author’s Fieldnote 2012)

For some, not being recognised by spectators, including other cosplayers and photographers, caused them to experience feelings of disappointment and frustration. At AVCon in 2012 I ran into a cosplayer I knew who was dressed as “Cure Blossom” from the Pretty Cure franchise, a franchise very popular with Japanese audiences but unavailable to Australian audiences. In our brief exchange I mentioned the name of her character and she immediately exclaimed that she was glad that I had recognised her costume as
she was feeling disappointed that other people had not recognised the character.

Other cosplayers I spoke with argued that their aim was not for their performance to be widely recognised by audiences but only recognised by select, appreciative fans:

J: When I did Vampire Willow the ones that recognised it were quite excited and they asked for photos with them being bitten and it was quite exciting. I haven’t done anything really mainstream enough to warrant that stuff like when Darren wears his Cyberman suit to cons. He gets swamped. We can’t take him anywhere; he’s just covered in people. There are a lot of people who do costumes like that rather than things they love. I usually do things that aren’t that popular but the people that know it, love it.

(Julia, Author’s Interview 2012)

In her interview, Julia echoes a sentiment expressed by many cosplayers who view limited recognisability as a mark of distinction. Only fans with enough knowledge to recognise the cosplay are deemed the ‘right people’ to enjoy the costume. This attitude also brings to bear the value of amateurism as these cosplayers view themselves as choosing character for pure motives because they love the character or text and feel a deep affiliation rather than out of an impure desire for attention.

While performers strive to achieve recognisability, spectators themselves must be able to recognise. The ability to view cosplayers ‘correctly’ requires spectators to have a knowledge and understanding of the characters and texts referenced on display. To participate fully, spectators need to be able visually identify the characters being portrayed by cosplayers, often to have an understanding of the characters’ personalities, trademark poses and phrases and their relation to other characters and the narrative of the text. While cosplayers often fear that their costumes and performances will not be correctly understood and interpreted by spectators, spectators often fear offending cosplayers or portraying themselves as ignorant of important fan texts. When in cosplay myself, I was approached many times by non-cosplaying attendees who would begin to address me with, ‘Excuse me, but are you... [character name]?’ or alternatively, ‘I’m really sorry. I don’t know who you are but...’

I found that this response occurred frequently when I was wearing my “Juri Arisugawa” cosplay from the celebrated anime Revolutionary Girl Utena (J.C. Staff, 1996). Often spectators and other cosplayers would visually recognise the character and the identify
the series but would remark to me in somewhat abashed tones that they had yet to see the show, though, they assured me, they had always intended to watch it. I occasionally even found myself reassuring others that not seeing the series was okay because it had yet to have an Australian DVD release.

These exchanges are illustrative of the high level of value placed on fan knowledge within the convention–attending community. The ability to identify the characters being performed by cosplayers is a skill acquired by convention attendees through hours of ‘work’ outside of the convention time–space: watching television series and films, playing games, reading manga and western comics, visiting websites and forums and chatting with other fans.

Convention attendees who are unable to recognise the character being performed by the cosplayer are potentially unable to participate fully in the activity of fannish spectating; they are unable to enter into the game of knowing illusion. As one cosplay spectator explained the importance of recognisability to me:

> It’s not just authenticity but it’s that, ‘Oh yeah, I’m in on the joke. I get that. I understand that.’ (Author’s Fieldnote 2012)

Spectators who cannot recognise the characters are also excluded from participating in certain aspects of the pleasurable activity of evaluating the efforts of other cosplayers. They cannot judge the accuracy of the cosplay as they are unfamiliar with the original work the costume is referencing.

D: If I don’t recognise it how do I verify that it’s authentic? If someone’s doing a “Doctor Who” cosplay I know it and I recognise straightaway that not only are they being the Doctor but they’ve done a really awesome clone of Matt Smith. (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

In hallway performances framing is dependent upon recognisability. In a later conversation Daniel discussed elements he identified as ‘anchors’ of cosplay performance, particular costume elements, verbal catchphrases or embodied postures that would immediately render the performance as identifiable as a particular character to an audience (Daniel, Author’s Fieldnote 2012). He used “Jack Harkness’s” trademark trench coat as an example. According to Daniel if these elements were missing from a cosplay performance audiences would be unable to identify the performance (Daniel, Author’s Field-
Daniel explained that while he enjoyed watching cosplays of characters he recognised, he found watching cosplays of unrecognisable characters less amusing as his lack of familiarity with the original characters meant that he was unable to judge the merits of the cosplay and the cosplayer according to the value of accuracy.

Successfully framed in–character performances are co–created by both performers and audiences; performer and spectator can connect in a playful manner through the shared understanding of character and text. However, failure to recognise or be recognisable can result in embarrassment for both performers and spectators. The potential for failure on the part of performer or spectator is heightened by the large number of texts and characters that can be the subject of performance, as well as the varying levels craft and the performance competences on the part of the performer, and the levels of community knowledge possessed by the spectator.

6.3 Playing the Craftsperson

While some hallway actions may be framed by audiences and performers as ‘in–character’ performances, other actions can be framed as performances of cosplay craftsmanship. While cosplayers at events are often performing as characters or as fans they are also performing as craftspeople—dressmakers, make–up artists, prop–makers, wig stylists and actors. The performance of craftsmanship as an aspect of cosplayer identity is seldom explored in pre–existing accounts of cosplay performance (for an exception see Okabe (2012)). As outlined in the preceding chapters, crafting practices planning, designing, constructing, assembling are major components of cosplay communities of practice. The role of cosplayer as craftsperson is one that many cosplayers take seriously as demonstrated in previous discussions of ‘amateurism’ expressed in cosplay panels and cosplay narratives of costume assembly.

Convention hallways performances are one context in which cosplayers are able to perform themselves as craftspeople, skilled practitioners who have assembled the material items they are displaying on their bodies. Due to the spatial contexts of hallway performances spectators are better able to see details and flaws on costumes. Cosplayers and non–cosplaying spectators can intermingle and chat about cosplay construction. Cosplay competitions, a more formalised performance context where craftsmanship comes
to the fore again, will be discussed in the following chapter.

In contrast to the in–character framework within the craftsmanship participation–framework, cosplayers attempted present themselves and are judged by spectators as skilled craft practitioners. In interviews some cosplayers such as Jenita claimed that they primarily wanted to be seen as craftspeople. They wanted spectators and audiences to recognise their costumes as assembled–objects, created, sourced or put together through skill and effort. Spectators, especially those who cosplayed, often reported that they enjoyed watching and appreciating the skills of cosplayers.

The craftsmanship participation–framework often intersects with the ‘in–character’ framework through the concept of ‘accuracy’; cosplayers are judged on their ability to accurately mimic pre–existing character designs known to cosplayers and other spectators.

The craftsmanship participation–framework does not only focus on material aspects but is also often extended to include the ways that cosplayers perform the role of cosplay performers in the theatrical sense, displaying their skills in the crafts of acting, embodied mimicry, acrobatics and improvisation. Confusingly, cosplayers perform simultaneously as a character and as persons playing characters. In the Western arts world acting is often described as a ‘craft’ and is a skilled activity requiring the actor to achieve mastery of their body and voice. Not every cosplayer will have lovingly sewn metres of pearl beads onto a silken dress or hand–worked leather into wearable armour. Others may wish to demonstrate their skills in theatrical performance displaying their ability to recreate the character in this way and to elicit a desired response from spectators. As spectators and cosplayers may judge and compare material handiwork of hall cosplayers, so too are judgements made about the comparative performing abilities of cosplayers.

Cosplayers and non–cosplayers both discussed the (occasionally spiteful) pleasures of observing and evaluating hallway performances as performances of craftsmanship. Throughout my observations I never witnessed a cosplayer critique another cosplayer’s costume to her face in person; comments were often whispered to other members of the critiquing cosplayer’s party out of earshot of the person being evaluated. The amount of offstage work put into some cosplay costumes, and the close personal association between cosplayer and their self–created object or performance, mean that when critiques do occur
it is likely that cosplayers will feel a deep and personal sense of alienation. Severely critiquing another’s costume and skills to their face is considered an aggressive act.

X: Whenever I go to a convention and I’m wearing my Poison Ivy and I’m running around and I see another one, I’m like, (falsetto voice) ‘Oh, hi Poison Ivy!’ But in my head I’m like, ‘I’m so much better than you.’

C: I suppose we all do this, we make comparisons with ourselves to others. Are you mostly looking at the technical aspects of what you’ve done versus what they’ve done?

X: Yep. I see other people and I’m like, mine looks better, mine’s made better. Hers will last one wear, maybe two and they’re held together with tape and glue. (Author’s Interview 2012)

At the heart of many comments made by spectators was the idea that the skills, and perhaps most importantly, the efforts of the cosplayer could be literally read from looking at their costumes. Spectators regularly claimed to be able to ‘tell’ how much effort the craftsperson had exerted simply by viewing their costume as the quotation above indicates. Spectators, particularly other cosplayers, would often become indignant and occasionally angry when describing cosplays that they deemed lacking in effort. The labours of the cosplayer need to be rendered visible and material for enjoyment of the spectators, as one spectator expressed it: ‘We want to see the passion.’ (Author’s Field-note 2012)

Some cosplayers considered the ability to act equally important to the creation of ‘good cosplay’ as the ability to assemble costume objects:

I think that simple costumes, when they’re done well but they’re performed well that’s when people should be winning prizes. It should be not only about the costume but the way you deliver it. [...] You can wear an okay costume but if you perform the shit out of it you can win prizes. It’s a persona that you put on when you’re wearing it as well. (Renee, Author’s Interview 2012)

In–character performances could also be judged as evidence of the skill and effort of the cosplayer. Cosplayers were considered more or less proficient at performing
as their characters, using their bodies and voices to recreate recognisable poses and phrases.

People who are playing people who are supposed to be sort of confident swordspeople or they’re playing someone who’s got a massive gun and they’re kind of, [very quiet voice] ‘Umm... yeah, cos I like the character and stuff.’ And you’re like urghh All you need to do to be better is just speak with a little more confidence. (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

In spontaneous hallway performances or when posing for photographs, cosplayers whose embodied performances did not cohere with other elements of their self-presentation, particularly the character as represented by their costume and props were often judged to be lacklustre by spectators and other cosplayers.

However, skill is not always in the eye of the spectator. A self-made costume, a commissioned costume and a bought costume are not always visually distinguishable. The wearer of the costume did not always assemble the costume. Hallway performances of cosplay craftsmanship often involve verbal discussions of costume and narratives of costume assembly. In his study of Japanese cosplayers, Okabe (2012) identifies shared stories of craft processes as a major form of cosplay knowledge dissemination.

Narratives about assembly processes are simultaneously presentations of the self. Theorists of material culture have highlighted that narrated stories about objects can be used by the narrator to draw past events into the present moment and create a very particular impression of the teller (Ochs and Capps, 1996; Shankar, 2006). Hallway exchanges regarding craft knowledge can create relationships between cosplayers, including hierarchical relationships where the questioner is positioned as novice and the responder is positioned as experienced.

Typically exchanges begin with one cosplayer asking another for a photograph or complimenting another cosplayer on their costume or a feature of the costume embroidery, wig styling, gem casting, props. When dressed as “Kusuri-uri”, for example, I received comments about my ears: ‘I love your ears!’ or ‘Your ears are so cute.’ Sometimes direct questions were asked about how particular features were constructed and sometimes cosplayers provided construction information as a form of reply. When complimented on my ears I would often reply, ‘Thanks. They’re just foam and papier mache’ (Author’s Fieldnote 2011).
Cosplayers that I approached at events would sometimes provide longer narratives about their construction processes. In these narratives cosplayers often emphasised the amount of effort that they had put into their costume. For example, a *Trinity Blood* cosplayer I approached at AVCon was at pains to point out to me that she had hand stitched rows of hundreds upon hundreds of imitation pearls to her dress. Others emphasised the mundane nature of the materials that they had used. A woman in a very impressive costume from *World of Warcraft* explained to me how she had constructed her towering horns from cardboard toilet rolls. If she had not told me about her use of everyday materials I would never have guessed from looking at the finished product.

Sharing stories of assembly processes can help to build relationships between cosplayers and distribute cosplay knowledge. At Supanova Adelaide 2013 I was attending as part a group of *Game of Thrones* cosplayers when we ran into another group cosplaying characters from the same television show. We started discussing each other’s costumes. I complimented a “Cersei” cosplayer on her belt and she told me that she had used the thermoplastic, Worbla, as the main material and listed the main suppliers she knew in Adelaide. Members of each group took photographs of each other’s costumes, posed together in photographs and continued our relationships and discussions later through Facebook.

The idea that meeting other, experienced cosplayers at conventions is an excellent way of developing a cosplay novice’s craft knowledge and social network was regularly promoted in cosplay panels. In these situations a novice is encouraged to ask an experienced cosplayer how they achieved a particular effect, how they were able to balance on stilts or mould their armour, and the experienced cosplayer reveals this information for the benefit of the novice. An experienced cosplayer is a cosplayer with stories to tell about their assembly processes. Those whose assembly processes are simpler may not have any interesting information to relate.

Exchanges about cosplay construction could sometimes cause cosplayers embarrassment rather than pride. At one event I complimented a young *Final Fantasy XIII* cosplayer on her ‘Lightning’ cosplay. She looked somewhat abashed and said that it was ‘only’ a bought cosplay. I quickly sought to reassure her by saying that I thought she wore it very well. While many of the cosplayers with whom I attended conventions often wore cosplays with purchased, pre–made elements and many cosplayers identified this as a normal, acceptable part of cosplay practice, the idea that completely
self-created costumes are superior to ‘shelf cosplays’ was echoed cosplayers’ hallway performances.

In interview I talked with Daniel about an exchange that had made him feel embarrassed:

D: [...] One person asked how I made the coat and I was like, ‘Umm I bought it.’

C: When they asked you had you bought it you sound like you felt uncomfortable. Why did you feel uncomfortable?

D: Because the people who make their things from scratch seem to get a they put more effort in to it. They win the competition because they didn’t get theirs from the shop. They vacuum hydrofoiled their coat from nothingness and personally wove the threads. (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

After his first experience attending an event dressed as “Squirtle” from the Pokémon franchise, a costume he had made himself, Daniel reported to me that he felt much more confident about talking to other cosplayers:

People ask me about the costume and I tell them about dyeing the shell and the problems I had with the tail. It’s good. Now I’ve got a story to tell. (Daniel, Author’s Fieldnote 2012)

In hallway contexts, possessing a narrative of assembly can distinguish experienced practitioners from the novice cosplayers. Through narrating their assembly processes, cosplayers verbally articulate their craft skills and creative choices. They have tips and tricks they can share with others; they can exchange knowledge with other experienced cosplayers or dispense wisdom to newcomers. Unlike those with self-made components, cosplayers wearing ‘shelf cosplays’ cannot respond to questions with long construction narratives that perform their effort, skill and dedication to their practice. Hallway exchanges allow cosplayers to perform themselves as master crafters but also create the potential for the cosplayer to be revealed as a novice.
Like ‘in–character’ role play, craftsmanship performances can be both anxiety–provoking and pleasurable. Cosplayers, in the lead up to events, frequently expressed online their fears that their costumes, and consequently their skills, would be found wanting. As the examples above demonstrate, this anxiety is justified. In hallway contexts cosplayers may find their costumes and performances the subject of craftsmanship evaluation by practitioners and other spectators. Craftsmanship is evaluated through both the visual and verbal aspects of the performance. These exchanges can bring practitioners closer through the exchange of stories between peers or the instruction provided by experienced practitioners to newcomers. However, these performances can also be struggles for distinction as cosplayers are required to demonstrate their competency to an observing audience. Again, cosplay craft competences are performed and objectified.

### 6.4 Performing Sexiness

Framing in–character and craft performances can be confusing, with the potential for success and failure. However, the most ambiguous participation–frameworks for performers and spectators to negotiate are performances of sexiness. Other studies have explored cosplay performances of gender and sexual identities, but I am focusing on the more nebulous quality of sexiness which was deemed desirable by many participants. As with other types of hallway performances, successful performances of sexiness rely on both performer competences and audience interpretation. However, as emphasised in dress and performance ethnographies of other cultural contexts (see for example Clarke and Miller (2002); Hansen (2004); Cowan (1990); Bridgwood (1995); Woodward (2007b)), sexy performances are fraught with risk for performers, and sometimes spectators. Negotiations of sexiness can involve discussions of competency, bodily accuracy and attractiveness, amateurism, pleasure and danger.

Within Australian cosplay communities of practice sexiness is a nebulous concept. What is considered ‘sexy’ amongst cosplayers and spectators varies considerably. Throughout my fieldwork I encountered many genres of sexiness that spanned across boundaries of gender, sexuality and culture. Many of these genres of sexiness reflected representations of sexiness in cosplay source texts, as well as ideas of sexiness within fan communities and from the broader contexts of Australian culture.
Figure 6.11: Renee as "Jessica Rabbit" (Photograph by Emmanuel Photakis)
For example, Renee’s “Jessica Rabbit” cosplay from the film, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), draws upon a very particular Western concept of sexiness that is feminine and nostalgic, playing on cultural myths of the seductress and the femme fatale. In her costuming activities Renee explicitly attempts to practice and celebrate this concept of retro feminine sexiness and incorporates traditional burlesque visual and performance elements into many of her costumes.

In contrast, Maddie views the Maid as representing a very different kind of sexiness:

"Sexy, yes, but more of an innocent sexy, so it’s more like this untouchable essence as opposed to this kind of skanky girl who’s been around the block lots of times. It’s that if you get lucky with a maid, you know you probably won’t because you’re not really supposed to; it’s like an amazing thing."

(Maddie, Author’s Interview 2010)

Maddie views this concept of Maid sexiness, with its ideas of purity and subservience, as developing out of Japanese cultural texts and practices, such as the maid caf culture. Both these concepts of sexiness differ considerably from the masculine, military, queer sexiness associated with Daniel’s performance of “Captain Jack Harkness”.

Interpretations of cosplay performances as ‘sexy’ often intersect with other participation frameworks. As with in–character performances, sexy performances may reference and gain meaning from their relationship with pre–existing designs and texts. Cosplayers may deliberately choose to perform characters that are recognised in the fan community as being sexually attractive, flirtatious or even sexually aggressive. These characters may be represented in this manner in the original texts or represented this way in widely discussed non–canonical fan interpretations. Choosing these kinds of characters can provide the cosplayer with an opportunity to perform a variety of sexual identities, dress in particular styles or use particular props, and engage in behaviour that they personally would not enact in more everyday contexts, behaviour that could be deemed inappropriate or offensive outside of the convention event space.

C: You like to take on the character’s persona?
D: It makes things acceptable that I might not normally do. It’s the AVCon environment as well. They kind of accept that because I’m dressed as Captain Jack I’m going to have the characteristics of Captain Jack and do things that I wouldn’t do. (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

In these instances the cosplayer is taking on a form of intertextual ‘sexiness’, a sexiness arising not necessarily from their personal, everyday attributes, their bodies and their performances, but rather from the character and understandings of the character as being sexy. The cosplayer performing as that character takes upon the ‘sexiness’ attributed to the character.

While cosplayers may perform particular characters as a way of being and feeling ‘sexy’, audiences also participate in the creation of fantasy performances. While fans may fantasise about meeting a favourite character and interacting with them, many fans enjoy imagining themselves interacting with favourite characters in a specifically sexual manner. When interacting with cosplayers, non–cosplaying fans have an opportunity to enact these fantasies in a very restricted sense.

During hallway performances spectators will commonly request to pose in photographs with cosplayers representing favourite characters. If the cosplayer is amenable this may involve the cosplayer, in–character, hugging the spectator or giving them a peck on the cheek. Sometimes spectators will even scream at passing cosplayers who are playing characters that they find attractive with phrases such as: ‘I love you “Sephiroth”!’ and ‘I want to have your babies!’ (Author’s Fieldnotes 2010). This loud, exaggerated display of affection can serve to attract the attention of the cosplayer but is also a form of performance of fandom and desire enacted by the spectator.

To my knowledge, my own cosplays did not receive this particular type of spectator attention but I regularly observed this form of interaction between non–cosplaying fans and cosplayers with whom I often attended events. When walking with a group of cosplaying friends through the trader’s hall at AVCon in 2012, we were suddenly alerted by some loud exclamations of ‘Oh my God! Oh my God! Can we have a picture with you?’ Some non–cosplaying female convention attendees had rushed up from a nearby stall to approach one of our party, Ashton, who was dressed as the eleventh incarnation of “The Doctor” from Doctor Who. They asked if they could hug him and he obliged. They then posed with him for several photographs, including a group photograph which
6.4. Performing Sexiness

was taken by another member of our party. This incident was discussed as a humorous subject in conversation by other members of the party for the rest of the afternoon where Ashton was described as a ‘celebrity’ and the female fans as ‘groupies.’

For cosplayers and audiences alike, performances of sexiness can be pleasurable and exciting. However, in contrast to other kinds of cosplay performance, performances of sexiness are particularly risky as failed performances can lead to acute embarrassment on the part of performers and/or spectators, and can potentially lead to physically and emotionally dangerous outcomes such as sexual harassment and bullying. Studies of performance in other ethnographic contexts have argued that constructions of sexiness in performance are particularly fraught with risk, especially for female performers, as ideas of sexiness are often negotiated against ideas of modesty, appropriateness and safety (Cowan, 1990; Bridgwood, 1995). Actors and spectators who ‘get it wrong’ in hallway contexts can face social and potentially even legal sanctions.

A common circumstance where performances of sexiness were deemed to have failed occurred when spectators would interpret a performance as ‘not sexy’. Walking around with other cosplayers I was often privy to whispered conversations about other cosplayers, usually unknown to my party who were deemed to be unattractive.

There’re always the girls at cons who you go, in your head, ‘Why? Why? Why did you wear that? You look horrible in that’. (Author’s Interview 2012)

Spectators would commonly claim that they could tell that a cosplayer was trying to produce as sexual performance but that it did not work. When on one occasion I asked some spectators how they could tell that the performer was intending to perform sexiness and their response was merely, ‘You just do.’ The reasons for which spectators explained failed performances of sexiness usually fell into one of two categories. In the first type of explanation cosplay performances of sexiness failed because the performer did not have a physical appearance that conformed to common Western aesthetics of beauty or attractiveness, typically cosplayers were considered either too fat or too ugly. During my fieldwork I observed that these comments were typically directed towards female cosplayers by both male and female cosplayers. These observations reflect well-established arguments about the gendered nature of the gaze in Western culture, and the public scrutiny of female performers’ bodies (e.g. Cowan (1990); Woodward (2007b)) A full exploration of the relationship between cosplay aesthetics and broader,
non-cosplay understandings of gendered aesthetics is beyond the scope of thesis, but is an aspect of the practice I intend to examine in later writings.

An alternative, more intriguing critique of a sexy cosplay was that the cosplayer was not skilled enough to create a sexy performance.

There’s a whole argument around what you’re trying to portray when you cosplay but if you’re going to be Lara Croft you’re committing to looking and acting a certain way if you’re going to do that cosplay. You’re going to wear teeny tiny shorts and you’re going to attempt to randomly seduce things. (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

In this instance it is not the physical appearance of the cosplayer that is the target of critique by audiences but rather their ability or willingness to perform ‘sexy’ gestures, poses or catchphrases associated with the character. Failed sexiness here is linked with inaccuracy.

A second type of failed performance occurred when cosplayers who were intending to present non-sexual performances had their performances framed as sexual by audiences. The cosplayer intending to create and perform an accurate cosplay may easily unintentionally create a ‘sexy’ cosplay. As several cosplayers pointed out in interviews, the prevalence of sexualised depictions of both male and female bodies in popular source texts such as anime, manga, Western comics and videogames, meant that it was often difficult to find characters who did not wear revealing or eroticised outfits.

An example commonly discussed among the cosplayers I attended conventions with was the problem of ‘spandex’. In interview Renee pointed out that Western superheroes such as “Batman” and “Superman” are beloved characters and popular cosplay inspiration sources. She noted that many superheroes wear skin-tight, body hugging outfits and to recreate that look many cosplayers use spandex and lycra and other figure hugging fabrics which can reveal the contours cosplayer’s body in explicit detail. While the figure-hugging outfit may be visually accurate to the original character design, viewers of the costume may see the prominence of normally hidden body parts as a form of sexual display (Author’s Interview 2012).

Encountering spandex–wearing cosplaying bodies for the first time at AVCon, Daniel reported that he felt he could not avoid seeing their performances as sexual and felt
conflicted by what he saw as a personal sexual display in a public setting: ‘...It was just kind of, put that away!’ (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012). The example of spandex highlights the ambiguity of the meanings attributed to material items used in cosplay performances. Corsets and leather were other ambiguous items that were sometimes framed as sexual and in other circumstances not.

Within convention communities there is a view that certain forms of dress can be interpreted as overtly sexual to a point where it could offend or endanger participants. Convention events often attempted to mediate between cosplay understandings of acceptable or desirable costume and more ‘everyday’ or even legal definitions of appropriate dress through the publication and enforcement of dress codes for events:

- Remember that this is a family oriented event. If it is too risqué or deemed inappropriate, you will be withdrawn from the competition and told to change. If you refuse to do so, you will be removed from the convention without refund.


Another form of failed performance occurred when audiences interpreted cosplayers’ performances as sexual performances enacted for the sake of ‘getting attention’. At AVCon I was chatting with a group of cosplayers in a foyer when a trio dressed as some form of Norse or vaguely ‘barbarian’ warriors strode past us. The cosplayers, one male and two female, wore what can be best described as furry and metallic underwear, high platform stilts covered in fur and carried large prop axes. Their appearances were striking and detailed. A cosplayer of my own party turned to me and said in reference to the trio, ‘Oh I just hate that. It’s just so skanky.’ (Author’s Fieldnote 2012)

Perhaps the most potentially problematic failures of sexual performance occurred when cosplayers’ playful performances of ‘sexiness’ were understood by audiences as invitations to non–playful sexual interaction. Neither I nor any of the cosplayers with whom I regularly associated reported experiencing unwanted comments, touching or were photographed without consent but stories of cosplayers being sexually harassed were circulated online. A male cosplay photographer even sent me a cartoon ‘cosplay public service announcement’ outlining correct and incorrect ways of interacting with cosplayers, especially female cosplayers. In these narratives women were usually por-
trayed as victims and men as the attackers.

Concerns over the safety of cosplayers and other convention–attendees have manifested themselves in convention organisers creating behavioural codes of conduct. Recently two forms of physical interaction between cosplayers and spectators have been forbidden or restricted at several Australian conventions: ‘glomping’, where fans give cosplayers unexpected and aggressive embraces, and ‘free hugs’, where convention attendees wear signs around their necks displaying that they are willing to hug any and all who approach them.

Cosplayers who happily identified their cosplays as ‘sexy’ and reported that they enjoyed being considered sexy by spectators still expressed some level of anxiety that their performances could attract undesired sexual gazes, comments or behaviour. Maddie, who was mostly comfortable with spectator attention while volunteering at AV-Con’s maid caf, reported some instances where the attentions of others did make her feel uneasy:

> It was mainly for the photos single guys who were alone and slightly overweight, kind of creepy. There was this one guy who was dressed like Harry Potter and he walked around the whole of AVCon taking photos with every girl he saw it was so weird! Me and my friends afterwards were like, “Did Harry Potter come up to you?” And we were like, “yeah”.

(Maddie, Author’s Interview 2010)

Maddie’s narrative provides an important insight into the subtle and shifting boundaries between perceptions of ‘appropriate’ and ‘creepy’ gazing and behaviour in convention contexts. The actions of the Harry Potter cosplayer, as described by Maddie, seem at first to be acceptable within the contexts of conventions; spectators taking photographs of cosplayers is a commonplace activity at conventions and Maddie herself was generally willing to be photographed. However, the perception that the Harry Potter cosplayer was only photographing girls and ignoring male cosplayers caused Maddie and her friends to suspect that he was gazing at women as sexual–objects rather than cosplayers. Underpinning this anxiety is the fear that convention attendees will mistake playful performances for non–play performances (Bateson, 1955). Maddie’s anxiety that single, male spectators will misunderstand the ‘rules’ and transgress the boundaries between play and ‘everyday life’ was echoed by other cosplayers. As Bateson
(1955) has highlighted, the framing of actions as play or non–play can hinge on the interpretation of apparently trivial words, stances or gestures. In the playground of convention hallways there is always the potential for ‘frame–slippage’ (Goffman, 1981). For cosplayers play can be exciting but socially dangerous as the negotiation of multiple framings can be easily mismanaged and participants can feel anxious, humiliated or neglected.

6.5 Conclusion: Framing the Chaos

During my fieldwork cosplayers would regularly send me links to comedy videos critiquing or celebrating cosplay. One of these videos, entitled Comic–Con Cosplay Catastrophe’, produced by the US–based comedy website CollegeHumor, highlighted the challenges cosplayers and spectators face in framing performances. The video depicts a fictional Question and Answer session at the end of a panel. The panellists fail to identify any of the characters portrayed by the cosplayers in audience. The cosplayers are all dressed in hybrid costumes combining two different characters such as “Spider–man” and “Harry Potter”, or Steampunk and gender–flipped alternative versions of the characters. Confusion abounds. The failure of the cosplay performances in this fictional account are attributed to the cosplaying performers themselves who have apparently failed to make their costumes recognisable or accurate to audiences. In this video the cosplaying characters are represented as exaggeratedly self–absorbed individuals who are interested only in self–expression. The cosplayers reference ideas and characters known only to themselves:

Cosplayer: This makes sense in my fan fiction. Panellist: Yeah, I haven’t read that.  
(‘Comic–Con Cosplay Catastrophe’ [CollegeHumor, accessed 10/12/2014])

The video, while unfortunately denigrating alternative forms of cosplay, does however highlight the occasionally chaotic and confusing nature of cosplay performances. Audiences do not always share or understand the intentions of performers. Many ethnographic accounts of performance acts tend to assume that those involved, performers and spectators, have a reasonably strong shared understanding of the forms and meanings of the performance. In the past anthropologists have tended to focus on more for-
malised types of performance rituals and traditional forms of theatrical performance. While these performances can be considered liminal or liminoid and contain phases of structural inversion and fluidity, they are often, however, highly formalised events with prescribed spaces, durations and roles (Turner, 1979).

Hallway performances, in contrast, can appear rather random and obtuse, even to those producing them. They have no set form or duration. Participants can be spectators in one moment and performers the next. The stage can be wherever a camera lens is pointed. Like other cultural products of cosplay, hallway performances are assemblages. Performers and spectators, texts, narratives and objects, align together for a brief moment in a convention corridor or foyer. More fragile than a hot-glued kimono, these assemblages may form and disperse in a matter of minutes.

Due to the unstable spatial boundaries, the shifting roles and empherality, framing hallway performances can be a complex activity. In these temporary assemblages framing is produced in negotiation between spectators and performers. Throughout this chapter I have explored the framing of in–character performances, performances of craftsmanship and performances of sexiness. In analysing the framing of hallway performances I have highlighted the ways that performance acts and meaning–making are produced collaboratively in negotiations between cosplayers, photographers and spectators. Like the costume objects I have explored in Chapter 4 and the photographs I will explore in Chapter 8, hallway performances may have many creators and many audiences.

However, hallway performances can be a source of considerable anxiety. Previous studies of negotiations in social and theatrical performance have identified that polyvalency and ambiguity can pose social risks to both spectators and performers. In the negotiation of multiple roles and frameworks there is always the potential for misinterpretation and slippage. An in–character’ performance can be interpreted as a performance of ‘sexiness’; a performance of craftsmanship’ may fail if the cosplayer does not have a narrative of assembly to recount. Hallway performances are always risky performances.

In some ways hallway performances can be viewed as a microcosm of the practice of cosplay within Australia, as the production of these performances involve processes of assembly, negotiation, and distribution. These performances are temporary assemblages of performers and spectators, roles and framings are produced in negotiation, and the
product the performance is redistributed through photographs and videos as well as the memories and narratives of spectators and performers. Despite the apparent chaos and variety of convention hallways, practitioners do attempt to frame these performances, although framing in these contexts is a process of constant negotiation.

In this chapter I have explored the complexities of meaning-making in the contexts of semi-structured performance contexts. In contrast the following chapter will explore cosplay competitions as a more formalised performance context.
Chapter 7  
Performing the Self as Cosplay Master

‘Water is fat! Water is fat!’
(Wirru, Manifest Competition Video Author’s Transcript)

Chanting these nonsensical lyrics Australian master cosplayer Wirru energetically danced across the stage dressed as “Tidus” from Square’s (2001) role-playing video game Final Fantasy X. Raising his knees to his chest and punching his arms to the ceiling, he parodied an aerobics workout, keeping time to an audio track with a synthesised bass which pulsed through the auditorium.

One of his team mates, dressed as “Rikku”, interrupted him suddenly as the background music cut out, ‘Stop! I lost my grenade!’ There was a moment’s pause in the action as she located a prop grenade onstage. Raising the prop to display it to the audience, she exclaimed, ‘Found it!’ The music started again and the dancing continued. While this action would have appeared completely incomprehensible to outsiders, the audience of the cosplay competition at Melbourne’s Manifest roared with laughter.

This was the first time I saw Wirru and his companions perform in competition. Watching from the audience I realised I had seen these cosplayers and their costumes before at another convention, in another city. They had presented an introductory panel at SMASH in Sydney only a month prior. At that panel they had been acknowledged as cosplay masters, experienced practitioners who could explain ‘how to cosplay’ to
newcomers and outsiders. Here, these cosplayers were enacting a different kind of performance and putting their skills and costume objects forward for evaluation by judges and the audience.

Despite being a newcomer to the practice with only two conventions under my belt, I could tell that these were costumes produced by experienced cosplayers. The competitors’ costumes were both accurate and detailed. The colours and textures of their garments mimicked the clothing of their digital counterparts. On the competitors’ bodies the outfits recreated the proportions of the characters’ clothing with near exactitude.

The skit they presented was a self–described ‘warm–up exercise’ for Blitzball, a fictional sport depicted in Final Fantasy X. Lasting around three minutes, the performance was a highly energetic dance and chanting routine, a remix of the ‘YES’ dance video meme, created by comedian Robert J. Hoffman III. The original video bore no relationship, intertextual or otherwise, to the Final Fantasy canon but was instead a filmed comedy performance which had been shared among online communities.

In their performance the cosplayers blended elements of both Final Fantasy X and the ‘YES’ video. The competitors recreated and enacted the choreography of the video and used the same backing track. However, the dialogue of performance was altered to reference the videogame with the use of character names, the incorporation of character–appropriate props such as the grenade, and the framing of the dance as a ‘Blitzball warm–up exercise’. Much of the humour of the skit was derived from the deliberate juxtaposition of characters from an epic, apocalyptic fantasy game re–enacting a surreal and high camp dance routine.

Watching this bizarre and highly energised performance, the audience laughed and cheered. Some spectators used their smart phones and cameras to video the performance while many others captured the performers using still photography. The performance of Wirru and his team was not only witnessed by those present at the competition but was recorded and uploaded online for a broader audience.

This chapter focuses on a very different type of cosplay performance context, the cosplay competition.
Competitions feature at every anime, manga and videogame convention in Australia, as well as at major popular culture conventions such as Supanova and Armageddon. Smaller events such as cosplay meet–ups and parties may also feature cosplay competitions. In the Australian scene competitions can be divided into two broad types: day competitions which are held at local conventions and consist of only one round or heat, and multiple round competitions, the heats of which may be held at different conventions throughout the country, leading up to a Grand Final event. At time of writing one of the most prominent multiple–round competitions in Australia is the Madman National Cosplay Championship (MNCC), a competition that holds preliminary rounds at the Melbourne, Gold Coast, Sydney and Perth Supanova Expos, Adelaide’s AVCon and a grand final held at the Brisbane Supanova Expo. A convention such as AVCon may play host to both types of competition, staging a heat of the MNCC on the first day of the convention and a day competition on the second. Newcomers to the community may be surprised by the lengthy duration of the competitions. With often over fifty entrants to a day competition the event can stretch on for several hours.

In these highly structured events competitors participate in two distinct genres of performance, the interview and the skit, and compete to be recognised as masters. In this chapter I explore how, through assemblages of dress, improvisatory verbal performance and structured skits, competitors attempt to perform themselves as the embodiment of cosplay mastery, presenting both their technical competence and their adherence to community values ethics and aesthetics. To achieve the quality of mastery competitors must produce a ‘coherent’ (Goffman, 1990) performance; the performer’s dress, verbal narration and/or skit must combine in a way that is aligned and meaningful for the audience. In their Manifest performance, Wirru and friends assembled visually accurate costumes, skilfully combined language and visual elements from two contrasting texts. For this performance they were feted by the audience and awarded first prize.

I will argue further that in order to demonstrate true mastery competitors must not only achieve coherence in their presentation of self but they must successfully and publicly negotiate cosplay community values, especially the values of creativity, accuracy and amateurism, and render these values as coherent for the audience. In their narratives, dress and embodied performance, competitors must enact and negotiate often inherently contradictory values demonstrating both accuracy and creativity, competency and humility. To do this competitors employ a number of strategies including humour and
CHAPTER 7. PERFORMING THE SELF AS COSPLAY MASTER

intertextuality.

Cosplay masters are masters of assemblage. They are able to embody and render coherent the values of cosplay in their material performances. However, the self as master is also a distributed self (Gell, 1998). It is assembled in performance and then re–mediated and distributed to the wider community in the form of photographs and videos. Their mastery is made available for the consumption of a wider cosplaying public, beyond the temporal and spatial confines of the competition event. Masters are not only created but recreated as cosplay masters’ performances, skills and even created objects are distributed within the community.

Over the course of my fieldwork I attended over twenty cosplay competitions in person, competed in three and viewed many more on video. The data discussed in this chapter is drawn from my video recordings and transcripts of competition performances. I will restrict my focus to onstage performance moments in cosplay competitions, what happens when a competitor clambers onstage in oversized shoes to face the expectant crowd, their strategies of self–presentation and their public attempts to negotiate various contradictory values associated with cosplay. Many of the activities associated with cosplay competitions take place offstage: organising committees plan and stage the event, competitors assemble their costumes and rehearse skits, competitors, judges and spectators travel to the events, sometimes spending days in interstate road travel. However, here I am concerned with action performed onstage: what competitors look like, what they say and what they do, how they attempt to perform themselves as masters. These are the moments by which competitors are supposed to be evaluated by judges and are also the moments that are seen, captured and recorded by audience members.

7.1 The Assemblage, Negotiation and Distribution of Mastery

As outlined in Chapter 3, within Australian communities of practice there are cosplayers who are recognised as masters, experienced practitioners of high status who have increased capacity to influence other cosplayers within their communities and potentially the wider practice. While many terms can be used to describe these individuals
I will here refer to them as ‘masters’ as the terms ‘master’ and ‘mastery’ are regularly used within Australian cosplay communities to denote elite practitioners and excellence in cosplay. The terms have historical overtones as they were traditionally used in English to refer to a fully competent craft practitioner who had been admitted to a guild (Epstein, 1998). These historical connotations are occasionally referenced explicitly, as in the competitions held by the Australian Costumers’ Guild where competitors are divided into ‘Novice’, ‘Journeyman’ and ‘Master’ classes.

However, unlike the historical craft guild system where practitioners advanced through a series of predetermined roles according to strict rules and conditions, the career progression of a cosplayer from novice to master is far from formalised.

What are the ingredients of a cosplay champion? I feel the ingredients for a cosplay champion is the combination of different things. They can present themselves very well onstage; they can present themselves very well offstage as well; that they can be an ambassador for the art form that is cosplay. They can promote themselves heavily, promote how to do cosplay better, encourage others to join in and to do skits quite well as well as costuming. So it’s a combination of everything you do in cosplay. So it’s the finer details that make you a really good champion.

(Sly, MNCC 2011 Judges’ Interview Video Author’s Transcript)

This comment by Sly, a regular judge of Australia’s most prestigious cosplay competition the MNCC, emphasises several key ideas about cosplay mastery. Firstly, mastery is a ‘combination’, or assemblage of competencies. Masters must be highly competent at a variety of technical skills. This includes both craft skills such as dress–making, armour construction or makeup, and performance skills such as oration, bodily movement and comportment and improvisation.

In competition the skill–level of a cosplayer is read from their performance. Competitors’ onstage performances act as ‘indexes’ (Gell, 1998) of the competitor’s ongoing offstage life as a cosplayer. Competition performances are both the product and enactment of countless hours of planning, assembly and rehearsal. The onstage assemblage of costume, skit and interview collectively enacts and represents the competitor’s effort, skills, and relationships with other cosplayers and the community. Competition assemblages act as ‘cultural biographies’ (Kopytoff, 1986; Hoskins, 1998) for individual
competitors. As discussed in the previous chapter, the idea that effort, skill and intention can be read from a costume or performance is widespread throughout the communities. In competition contexts, this idea is reified as judges are expected to be able to evaluate the quality of a cosplay performance from the observation of costumes, portfolios and performances.

However, cosplay competitions are not solely focused around the evaluation of individual practitioners. Competitions can be considered as reflexive performances in the sense of Turner and Schechner (1988) as these highly structured events are set apart from more everyday cosplay activities and allow cosplay communities to recreate and discuss key values. Competitors and their performances here become focal points around which notions of cosplay are discussed and evaluated. Ethnographic studies of similar individualised aesthetic competitions such as beauty pageants have emphasised how contestants can come to materialise and represent both community aesthetics and moral values (Rogers, 1998; Schulz, 2000). Contestants themselves act as ‘indexes’ for community values that exist beyond the framing of the competition (Rogers, 1998, p.63). Cosplay masters are ‘indexes’ (Gell, 1998) of community–specific notions of ‘good cosplay.’

Goffman (1990) argues that in presenting public performances individuals attempt to conform to expected community values established by the frame, a cosplayer attempts to be a model cosplayer. To be successful in this all aspects of presentation, dress, comportment and speech, must cohere to these values (Goffman, 1990). This notion of ‘expressive coherence’ is echoed in the judge’s statement that cosplay champion is a status is achieved through ‘... a combination of everything you do in cosplay.’

However, as previous chapters have demonstrated, the qualities of ‘good’ cosplay – accuracy, completism, spectacle, amateurism and creativity – are nebulous and contested within the community. For competitors achieving Goffman’s (1990) ‘expressive coherence’ can be challenging. Ethnographies of dress, theatrical and ritual performance have argued that these performative activities require individuals to negotiate contradictory cultural values (Cowan, 1990; Hansen, 2005; Woodward, 2007b). In contrast to the negotiations undertaken in hallway performances described in Chapter 6, cosplayers participating in competitions must negotiate values of amateurism, accuracy and creativity within the framing boundaries of the more tightly structured performance forms of interview and skit. Within the confines of a three to ten minute onstage presentation
7.1. MASTERY

cosplay masters not only demonstrate their competency at community-specific skills but also demonstrate that they can successfully assemble and negotiate community values.

However, cosplay mastery is not only assembled in performance it is distributed. Referring again to the judge’s comment it is evident that masters have increased capacity to influence other cosplayers within their communities and potentially the wider practice. Cosplay masters are participants with high community profiles. They can be seen regularly, competing in competitions, presenting panels and web tutorials. Their costumes and performances are regularly photographed and videoed, and these images are distributed through prominent community websites. Wirru and his team members were regular competitors at competitions I observed throughout my fieldwork. They were panellists at multiple conventions. Their images were displayed on Madman Entertainment’s website and in calendars. Master cosplayers organise events, present panels, judge competitions, provide tutorials and mentor others.

Although participating in competitions is not essential for achieving mastery in cosplay, competitions can provide cosplayers with the opportunity to win recognition and exposure in a public and spectacular fashion. Bauman (1975) has argued that performances have the potential to transform social positions, and in cosplay competitions successful competitors have the opportunity to gain the status of masters. Competitions at large events are attended by hundreds of audience members. Competitions are photographed and often filmed and images and recordings of competitions are displayed online. Winning can bring prizes, and even more opportunities to be photographed and promoted online with winners of competitions such as MNCC heats regularly being the subject of special photo shoots and videos. Even competing can bring kudos, especially in ‘serious’ competitions such as the MNCC where contestants must submit a portfolio online before they can be approved for entry into the heats. During and after competition events I regularly observed conversations of spectators discussing whether a particular competitor was considered ‘good enough’ to compete. As I will discuss further in this chapter, winning was far from the only means of achieving master status through competitions as audiences regularly feted non-winning cosplayers and promoted their fame through the distribution of images and videos of their performances.
7.2 Competition Events and the Performance of Community Values

Public performance events like cosplay competitions can be used as a means of debating or reaffirming community values (Bauman, 1975; Turner, 1979; Cowan, 1990; Ahearn, 2012). According to Turner’s (1979) concept of ‘reflexive performance’, performances can provide communities or societies with an opportunity to stand apart from everyday time and action and reflect on key ideas and values. As events where ‘good’ cosplay is defined and ‘master cosplayers’ are identified and awarded, competitions are performance activities which are explicitly centred upon evaluation and defining the nature of cosplay.

Turner (1979) argues that in order for performances to be able to comment reflexively on community values they need to be framed as separate from everyday life. ‘To look at itself a society must cut out a piece of itself for inspection’, (Turner, 1979, p.468). This framing can be constructed through space (Cowan, 1990; Ahearn, 2012). In contrast to the performance activities described in the previous chapter, the spaces, durations and actions of cosplay competitions are more formally structured. The space in which cosplay competitions take place is usually, quite literally, a theatre be it a traditional hall complete with proscenium arch or the main lecture theatre of a convention centre.

In contrast to the more fluid spaces used for hallway performances explored in Chapter 6, competition theatres follow a highly–structured traditional Western model as there is a designated ‘stage’ area which is separate from, and visible to the audience. This visibility is usually achieved by the stage being a raised platform with stairs. These can often pose some serious challenges for cosplayers in bulky, wide or restrictive costumes. Towards the back of the stage there is usually a multimedia screen which allows competition organisers to display images, text and video as a backdrop to the cosplayers.

For the duration of the competition there is a clear demarcation between audience space and performance space. The audience in their area are expected to be seated, facing the stage and quiet, except when noise is considered appropriate. At several competitions competitors may be seated in the audience space before and after their performance moment, requiring them to move between audience and performance areas. When competitors are seated in the audience there is an expectation that they will adopt the role
and behaviours of an audience member. There are others who may also move freely between audience and performance spaces such as the host and volunteers assisting with technical support. Privileged photographers who may have permission to move out of their seats are still typically dissuaded from entering the stage.

To further establish the framing of the reflexive performance as separate to the flow of everyday life, participants may adopt more formalised roles for the duration of the event (Bauman, 1975; Turner, 1979). There are numerous roles undertaken by participants in a cosplay competition and participants may move between these roles during the course of the competition. Movement between these roles is generally of a more restricted nature in than in hallway performances. Certain roles, like those of the host or judges are fixed throughout the duration of the competition.

The Audience

Competition audiences are comprised of convention attendees, volunteers, non–competing cosplayers, and, through the increasing use video–recording and online live–streaming, viewers of the competition who may not even be present in the physical or temporal space of the competition event. An audience for a competition may be comprised of hundreds, even thousands of people. Those wishing to attend the physical event often have to queue for up to an hour to get a seat.

The Competitors

Competitors at a day competition may range in their level of skill and experience. They may be competing as an individual, or as a team or part of a group. Day competitions typically offer multiple sections and prizes for craftsmanship, performance or best all–rounder and may be stratified in terms of ability. At convention day competitions those competing for different prizes are not separated but instead all competitors are presented one after the other in a predetermined numerical order. A novice may therefore appear between two experienced cosplayers and skits may be positioned at any time throughout the competition at the organisers’ desire.

The Host

The host(s) or MC plays a key role in most competitions. Out of all the performers they spend the longest amount of time onstage and are usually necessarily to facilitate the smooth running of competition processes. The host’s typical role is to introduce and/or
interview the cosplayers, communicate with the judges, and usually to fill time with humorous antics (joking, singing, dancing, even acrobatics) when there is a technical hitch or delay.

The Judges

Typically judges are senior members of the community: experienced cosplayers (including previous winners), representatives of the sponsors of the competition, or convention organisers. The judges are usually seated separately from the rest of the audience, often at their own table or desk. Depending on the competition the judges may play a more or less visible role during the competition. In some instances judges are interviewed by the hosts, at others judges themselves will publicly question or interview the competitors. Occasionally the judges make no comment throughout the entire proceedings. At some competitions, often those which are more prestigious, the primary work of the judges actually takes place before the competition where competitors are prejudged “offstage” in a different venue inaccessible to the audience where the judges have an opportunity to question participants in depth and observe workmanship up close.

The Technical Support

These volunteers and convention organisers run the sound, media, stage set up and filming of the competition. Those assisting with sound, lighting and media are usually positioned at various desks throughout the convention space. If the competition is running smoothly they are expected to be an invisible presence. In the case of technical difficulties these people can suddenly come into prominence and may enter the stage, or be addressed directly by the host.

The Photographers

Photographers may also be members of the audience but there are usually some privileged groups of photographers whose primary purpose at the event is to photograph the competition. This group may include the convention’s official photographers, the competition’s official photographers, or photographers from external media outlets. These photographers are given special access to spaces in front of the stage and can move around the theatre. Their privileged status is usually objectified and displayed in the form of a ‘media pass’ worn around their neck on a lanyard.

From my fieldwork observations I identified four different flows of action that typically
occurred at Australian cosplay competitions. These different types of cosplay competition performance could take place within the same competition or alternatively the competition could feature only one type of performance:

Types of performance action in the temporal sequence that they occur:

- The contestant is announced by the host; the contestant enters the stage, poses for photographs and exits the stage. This type of performance is typical at events with a short running time or at ‘parade’ style events.

- The contestant is announced; the contestant enters the stage, poses for photographs, is interviewed by the host and exits the stage. This process is usually observable at day competitions.

- The contestant is announced; the contestant enters the stage, performs a skit, poses for photographs and exits the stage. This is a common process for skit competitors at large day competitions.

- The contestant is announced; the contestant enters the stage, performs a skit, is interviewed by the host, poses for photographs and exits the stage. Due to time constraints this pattern of action is used infrequently at day competitions and is the standard process at the Madman National Championship rounds.

The use of formal spaces, roles, and flows of action serve to create a performance atmosphere conducive to community reflexivity. Through the deliberate and extensive structuring of the event, audience attention can be focused on the cosplayers as individual competitors, highlighted and separated from the wider community. Unlike the hallway contexts of Chapter 6, here there are no questions as to who is the audience and who is the performer.

To be evaluated with the chance of achieving mastery, competitors have to step out of the crowds and put themselves onstage in front of over a hundred spectators. Their costume, skit and interview performances are highlighted through spatial separation and lighting. In several competitions, live video footage of the action is projected onto screens, allowing the audiences to see details and close-ups. An audience member can potentially see more than they normally would from the distance of their seat. These features emphasise the fact that it is the visual impact of the cosplayer, their props, sets and costumed body, that is considered the most important aspect of a competition.
entry.

However, as in many other contexts throughout the practice, the visual performance of cosplay costumes is accompanied by a verbal narrative or performance. In cosplay competitions competitors are judged on both craftsmanship and performance of character. These aspects are emphasised in two performance genres formalised in competitions: the interview which enables the competitor to narrate the offstage assembly of their costume; and the skit which requires the cosplayer to present a prepared ‘in–character’ performance.

### 7.3 Interviews

At the Grand Final of the 2010 Madman National Championship in Brisbane, Wirru stands onstage as “Siegfried” from the videogame *Soulcalibur IV*. Despite the humidity he is dressed in an elaborate suit of ice blue armour. Wing–like protrusions extend from his shoulders and he carries a giant prop sword which is transparent like an oversized shard of ice. The cosplayer audibly pants as the host holds a microphone under his chin.

Host: Okay what are you made of? What have we got here?

W: Death. Well I am made of expanded PVC sheets and plastic and Perspex and fibreglass and resin and paper clay.

Host: This is great man! And hold on...

W: Yes... and hand altered chain mail.

(MNCC Final 2010 Video Author’s Transcript)

In this next section of the chapter I will analyse two kinds of performance activities commonly undertaken at cosplay competitions: the interview and the skit. In performing both interview and skit competitors attempt to embody qualities of mastery and negotiate contradictory values. The interview is a particular genre of cosplay performance, a
7.3. INTERVIEWS

form of ‘verbal art’ (Bauman, 1975) with its own forms and stylistic techniques. These interviews do not necessarily serve to assist the judging process as competitors are almost always required to submit this kind of information in forms and portfolios to competition organisers some weeks prior to the competition date. Instead these interviews can be considered part of the cosplay performance. They serve to entertain and educate the audience and provide insights into the creation of the costume.

Like the interviews in beauty pageants as described by Rogers (1998) and Schulz (2000), these performed narratives enable the competitor to strategically present themselves for an audience and also provide the audience with another means by which they can evaluate the competitor. Bauman (1975) has argued that the delivery of performative verbal narratives requires considerable skill on the part of the performer. Failure to deliver the narrative in a compelling and contextually appropriate manner can result in an unsuccessful performance no matter how compelling the content (Bauman, 1975). Competition interviews pose additional challenges for performers as they require the competitor to memorise possible answers and/or improvise answers onstage (Rogers, 1998, p.68).

Most cosplay interview narratives describe the processes of transformation of objects. Through the use of questioning, the host or judge attempts to elicit the story of the costume the cosplayer is wearing, how and why it was created. Shankar (2006) has argued that verbal narratives about objects and objectifications can be used by individuals as a means of potentially enhancing personal status within a community. In their narratives of cosplay assembly competitors attempt to articulate the effort and love that has gone into the costumes they are wearing. Through their responses to questions, cosplayers verbally connect their onstage presentation with offstage processes and labour that are invisible to competition audiences and judges. In their stories of objectification processes cosplayers strategically present themselves as competent amateurs, deserving of attention and acclaim for their loving efforts.

As an audience member at the Madman National Cosplay Championship Grand Final in Brisbane, I was amazed by a strikingly tall female cosplayer who was dressed as the villainous character Cain Nightroad from the anime series *Trinity Blood*. Arrayed in bronze and white, carrying a massive prop mace which was taller than head height, she had six feathered wings attached to her back which was further decorated by a bronze, spiked wheel which acted somewhat like a halo or aureole in religious iconography. At
the centre of this halo was a genuine sheep’s skull. I was dazzled by her visual appearance and genuinely astounded that an amateur could create such a striking and apparently gravity–defying costume. During the competition the cosplayer was interviewed about her costume, in particular the decorations on her back:

Host: Tell us about the wheel on your back.

A: The wheel on my back?

Host: It’s not a wheel I know. I don’t know what it is; it’s just awesome.

A: Ah, my halo of spiky awesomeness?

Host: Oh, that’s the technical name? That’s awesome! Okay, your halo of spiky awesomeness, what are we dealing with there?

A: It’s actually made out of Tooheys poster board. Tooheys beer, good stuff.  
(MNCC Final 2010 Video Author’s Transcript)

The audience and host laughed at this revelation. The original material, the Toohey’s poster board, has been so transformed by the cosplayer that it is completely invisible to the audience, even with telephoto lenses. It is only through the verbal description of the costume that the audience is able to simultaneously picture two different visions of the object as halo of spiky awesomeness and as beer advertising cardboard. The transformation of the object from the mundane to the spectacular has been effected by the cosplayer and the audience knows this: the ‘halo of spiky awesomeness’ is surrounded by a ‘halo–effect of technical difficulty’ (Gell, 1999, p.46).

In this interview the ‘complete’ visual look of the cosplay is reversed or undone. Normally a costume is viewed as a whole but in interview the host typically draws attention to specific parts of the costume, individual props. It is only through this verbal deconstruction of the costume as performed by host and cosplayer that the efforts of the cosplayer are properly understood. Drawing on Gell’s (1998) ‘duree’, the offstage
construction performances of the cosplayer are temporally transposed onto the stage during the interview. The distributed cosplay object of construction, costume, bodily performance and oration comes together for a brief moment during the performance event.

Discussion of the use of mundane or surprising objects in cosplay costumes is a common theme in interviews. In this example the host questions a cosplayer about the feet of her robot–cat suit:

Host: Tell me about your big feet, what are they made of?

P: Camping foam mats and those ABC mats you get for little kids.

Host: Fantastic. There’s a child wondering where its toys have gone! [crowd laughs] That is awesome!

(Supanova Melbourne Competition 2012 Video Author’s Transcript)

The joke made by the host explicitly reminds the audience of the alternative, mundane purposes of the mats. The interplay between contestant and host portrays the cosplayer as a master bricoleur (Lévi-Strauss, 1966) who will re–fashion and re–purpose any object for cosplay construction. Everyday objects can be used to create cosplays and so can mundane techniques. In this example a contestant wearing impressive samurai–inspired armour describes her chain mail:

Host: But take us through things like the pants and of course this wonderful chain mail here and the chain mail on your arm please...

M: Okay... this is made from those flexible, roll up cutting boards and the chain mail is knitted [Host is laughing]. So yeah, you don’t have to spend a lot to look like this if you wanted to [cheers from crowd].

(MNCC Final 2011 Video Author’s Transcript)

Minutes before the cosplayer had been in–character, performing energetic martial arts movements, her performance and costume aggressive and martial. Now, in the interview the host and audience are presented with the (humorous) idea of knitted armour. In the
same interview the contestant also made the following remark about a gigantic robotic prop:

M: This took me three months to make, mostly out of cardboard. So yeah, you can make something really amazing out of something really dodgy if you just put in the time. [audience laughs and cheers]

(MNCC Final 2011 Video Author’s Transcript)

Throughout the interview the contestant verbally expressed the idea that this transformative power could be within the reach of other cosplayers in the audience. However, onstage she did not elaborate on the particular processes, the tools and skills she used in this transformation. Cosplayers in the audience, including me, could only guess at how she had assembled gauntlets out of cutting boards, robots out of cardboard and disguised the original nature of the materials beyond perception.

Cosplay assembly narratives often obfuscated the process rather than clarified it. Indeed a common response for cosplayers to give when interviewed about their construction is to provide a straight list of the materials used:

Host: Now let’s see; let us go through the actual outfit. Tell us, tell us all about it.

DR: [Begins pulling up her skirt. Host makes a show of averting his eyes.] There’s bloomers and a hoop petticoat, a tulle petticoat, I have a silk skirt with fabric I got in Vietnam. It’s two and a half circular skirts so it comes up to about [gestures over her head] here if I lift it. This lacy stuff I got in Kuala Lumpur. The main feature is all the lace on the bodice which I made by hand. (MNCC Final 2011 Video Author’s Transcript)

Listing materials and all the component parts the cosplayers provide audiences with an insight into the various objects comprising the cosplay but no hint as to how they achieved the spectacular visual effects using these items. The audience is left with the impression that the cosplayer has a talent for transformation, is skilled with working with different materials and above all has put an immense amount of ‘effort’ into the costume.
If audiences are not already impressed by the contestant’s ability to transform junk into spectacular cosplays, there are some interview narratives that go beyond normal recounts of costume construction, portraying the process as an epic, an extraordinary feat. Okabe (2012, p.240) in his exploration of Japanese cosplayers identifies ‘cosplay versions of heroic tales’ circulating among the community wherein the cosplayer displays some ‘extraordinary effort’ to create or wear their costume. The kinds of narratives Okabe records bear a striking similarity to heroic cosplay narratives told in Australian cosplay competitions. In interaction with the host the cosplayers utilise rhetorical strategies such as building suspense in order to portray cosplay construction as an even more difficult or mythic process.

Alternatively cosplayers may describe their processes with dramatic understatement. A cosplayer at a day competition at Supanova Melbourne used this technique to emphasise his amazing skill and speed at prop creation. The contestant walked onstage carrying a prop katana that was taller than himself. It was accurately recreated with an elegant curved blade and tsuka ito–style cord wrappings around the tang.

H: Tell us about the sword, obviously...

A: Thursday afternoon.

H: What? [a pause as the contestant smiles] What?

A: I did this on Thursday afternoon. It’s a record–breaking ten dollars spent on this. [crowd cheers] And it’s my second largest prop.

H: Yeah. It’s awesome.

(Supanova Melbourne Competition 2012 Video Author’s Transcript)

The juxtaposition between the beautiful presentation of the prop and the understatement of the contestant’s verbal delivery emphasised the creation of the sword as a heroic cosplay feat, achievable only by a highly experienced cosplayer.

During interviews cosplayers will often verbally describe the process of cosplay construction in a humorous manner that depicts costume construction as a crazy or violent
process. Sometimes these descriptions are given while the cosplayer is ‘in–character’, the cosplayer describes the construction process in the way their character might achieve it or describe it, as in the following excerpt from the interview with the Cain Nightroad cosplayer:

Host: That’s a real skull! This is awesome! Where did you pick up the skull?

A: Glen Innes [a NSW country town]. It’s a small country town about ten hours train ride from Sydney.

Host: You didn’t kill it, did you?

A: Course I did!

Host: [pointing at lance] With that?

A: No, with my bare hands and teeth. It’s the only way to go! [crowd laughs]

(MNCC Final 2011 Video Author’s Transcript)

Together the host and cosplayer jokingly create a narrative fiction that the cosplayer in the personality of the violent, fratricidal “Cain Nightroad” physically and brutally killed a sheep as part of the construction process. The framing of the character’s response as an ‘in–character’ performance fictionalises the assembly process and distances the competitor from her narrative of construction.

Why do cosplayers employ these varied rhetorical strategies in interviews? In their narratives of assembly cosplayers attempt to strategically present themselves as competent and, above all, dedicated practitioners who have devoted time, effort, and money to the creation of their costumes. However, in presenting these narratives competitors must also be careful not to alienate judges and audiences by engaging in overt self-aggrandisement. As discussed in the previous chapter, cosplayers are at risk of critique if their motives for participating are deemed to be impure, if their performance is inter-
preted as attention-seeking.

In the view of many cosplayers and spectators competing to win was portrayed as contrary to the value of amateurism. In interview experienced competitor Jenita argued that cosplayers should compete out of love for the character and their craft and that those who participated only in order to win would be ultimately disappointed. In Jenita’s view, cosplayers who performed for recognition would be dissatisfied if that recognition was not forthcoming whereas cosplayers who performed for other motivations would enjoy the experience regardless of the outcome. Some cosplayers even viewed competitions more generally as a threat to the purity of the practice and announced with pride that they had never taken part, or if they had competed initially had now renounced competing.

As theorists have argued, verbal performances can require highly strategic self-presentations on the part of the performer (Bauman, 1975; Goffman, 1990).

Spinning out their tellings through choice of words, degree of elaboration, attribution of causality and sequentiality, and the foregrounding and back-grounding of emotions, circumstances, and behavior, narrators build novel understandings of themselves-in-the-world. (Ochs and Capps (1996, p.22))

In interviews competitors must strategically negotiate their presentation of selves as both skilful craftspeople and amateurs who have assembled their costumes and performances as an expression of love for character, text, or technique. Scholars of dress practices have highlighted how practitioners must balance the multiple meanings of dress as a text (Bridgwood, 1995; Durham, 1999; Woodward, 2007b); here the balancing must also be enacted in speech. The use of humour, exaggeration, casual understatement and in-character framing, enable competitors to appear relatable to the audience and deflect attention from the competitive aspects of the performance. The narrative emphasis on the use of mundane and cheap materials achieves a double effect of presenting the cosplayer as approachable, sharing the concerns of other cosplayers, and showcasing their unique transformative skill. In improvised interview responses cosplayers must essentially boast of their personal competences, yet maintain a humble, relatable demeanour.
7.4 Skits

Cosplayers must also negotiate and reify conflicting community values in the other major type of formal performance found in competitions, the skit. Competitors may showcase their crafting talents through the materiality of their costume and the impact of their interview narrative, but in order to win at major competitions like the MNCC they also have to demonstrate their theatrical competences. Skit performances enable cosplayers to showcase their ability to enact the character, connect with the audience, and reveal a deep understanding or affinity for the source text or character. These performances can be highly varied with the incorporation of different performance media including mime, singing, acrobatics, dance, puppetry and animation. Skits are usually planned and rehearsed and are therefore much less improvisatory than interview narratives. Like cosplay costumes, skit performances act as an index of countless hours of backstage work undertaken by the cosplayer.

In the skits I witnessed during fieldwork competitors either attempted to accurately ‘recreate’ a scene, sequence or moment from the text, or they attempted to ‘remix’ elements from one key text with another, often unrelated text. The performance of both ‘recreation’ and ‘remix’ require the competitor to enact and negotiate community values, particularly the values of accuracy and creativity. As the following examples of skits performed by Wirru in the MNCC will demonstrate, ‘recreation’ skits require creativity on the part of the performer in order to accurately remediate a text, and, conversely, ‘remix’ skits rely on the performer’s ability to accurately recreate details to create an innovative and successful juxtaposition between two referenced texts.

Dressed as “Seigfried” at the MNCC Grand Final in 2010, Wirru attempted to recreate a scene from the game Soul Calibur V onstage. Wirru’s skit recreated a climactic scene in which “Seigfried” confronts his evil alter–ego “Nightmare” and, in an extremely convoluted plot twist, ends up killing an earlier version of himself in order to defeat Nightmare.

Recreation performances, like cosplay costumes, involve the translation or remediation of a text in one form, for example a comic, film or videogame, into another, a live theatrical skit. As with the costume assembly process described in Chapter 4, the copying here is a creative process; the recreated elements of the skit are created through inno-
In his *Soul Calibur* skit Wirru represented three different characters onstage even though he was the only performer physically present. In his detailed fibreglass armour, Wirru used his own costumed body to portray “Seigfried” from *Soul Calibur V*. Wirru animated his costume further by recreating the character’s poses and movement through miming his actions. The character’s voice was represented by a recording of Wirru’s voice recreating the game’s dialogue in the original Japanese. The character of “Nightmare” was recreated through recorded dialogue, also performed by Wirru, and animated video footage projected on a screen. In interview Wirru revealed that he had recreated the game’s animation himself, with the assistance of a friend. An earlier version of the Seigfried character was represented onstage by a handcrafted, human–sized mannequin which was statically posed kneeling in the centre of the stage. Like Wirru himself, the mannequin was dressed in an elaborate costume, complete with gauntlets, sword and matching blond wig. These techniques were all used in other skits I witnessed where cosplayers used film clips, mannequins, or puppetry to represent other characters.

The flow of the narrative was recreated visually onstage through mime performed by Wirru and animated footage displayed onscreen, and aurally through the use of pre–recorded sound. Japanese language dialogue from the game was recreated using the cosplayer’s own voice. The audio presentation also included pre–recorded music. In his onstage interview Wirru revealed he had personally transcribed music from the game and then recorded a live performance of the music using an orchestra from his old high school.

This performance won Wirru the MNCC for 2010. However, I throughout my fieldwork I witnessed other recreation performances which were not as successful. In many instances in these skits the costumes and props used by the performers did not accurately recreate the visual elements of the text; they were unrecognisable to audiences and judges.

However, performances which included visually accurate elements but did not use creative means to recreate the text in performance also failed to produce a strongly positive response from the audience or impress the judges. In one instance South Australian
cosplayer Miss Ollie performed at the 2011 MNCC final dressed in a highly accurate costume inspired by the manga, *Princess Jellyfish* (Higashimura, 2008). The cosplayer had included tiny subtle details such as nail art, white pearling on a white tutu, tiny tentacle–shaped decorations, all of which were invisible to the sight of the average audience member. Miss Ollie performed on a bare stage, with no props or set, to an audio–recording of accurately recreated dialogue from the anime–adaptation. The lack of strong visual elements in her skit seemed to cause the audience to disengage. The audience, who had been loud and enthusiastic in their appreciation for the previous contestant, who had been accompanied by a giant prop robot, were quieter and subdued.

In another instance Jenita, a competitor in the MNCC in 2009, assembled a beautifully detailed and proportioned robot costume inspired by Studio Ghibli’s (1986) anime film, *Laputa, Castle in the Sky*. This costume was showcased on several sites online and was well–known by cosplayers in Adelaide who praised its scale and accuracy in interviews and casual conversations. However, Jenita did not win the championship. At a panel at AVCon in 2010 Jenita attributed her lack of success to the nature of the costume, which although visually accurate prevented her from moving easily. Her inability to move around the stage restricted the story she could present onstage and meant that her performance was viewed as too static with little drama.

Returning to Goffman’s (1990) notion of coherence, the success or failure of a recreation cosplay skit appears to hinge on the cosplayer’s ability to assemble all the elements of the performance. Coherence here does not involve a strict mimicry of the original work. This would be impossible as the performance is a remediation. Instead, performers achieve coherence by successfully negotiating accuracy and innovation.

The success of a recreation cosplay skit relies heavily both upon the cosplayers’ abilities to create visually identifiable representations of the character through costume and embodied performance, and upon spectators possessing an understanding of the characters’ personalities, trademark poses and phrases and their relation to other characters and the narrative of the text. The performer must be skilled enough to create a visually identifiable performance and the spectator must be knowledgeable enough to understand and interpret the performance.

At the final of the MNCC in 2013, however, Wirru presented a very different remix–style
skit. Performing as superhero character “Origami Cyclone” from the anime *Tiger & Bunny* (Sunrise, 2011), Wirru enacted a non–canonical imagining of a scenario in which all the other, competent, heroes from anime disappeared and the less than functional character was left to cope on his own. Through the use of mime, dance, pre–recorded audio and video footage the skit depicted Origami Cyclone desperately trying to recall his hero training. The premise of the skit enabled Wirru to incorporate references to numerous other texts including other anime such as *Attack on Titan* (2009) and broader cultural elements including references to children’s television.

Again, Wirru engaged in creative recreation as he represented a cityscape setting using a small–scale model city constructed out of cardboard and represented other characters onstage using pre–recorded audio and video. His costumed body recreated the visual appearance of the animated character in proportionate scale and detail. In his performance Wirru also mimicked the stealthy, creeping movements of the ninja–like character. In a segment framed as ‘Gaining popularity with children,’ by text displayed on the video footage, Wirru performed as “Origami Cyclone” pretending to be a children’s television presenter. Wirru as “Origami Cyclone” sang and danced to a revised version of the popular children’s song, ‘I’m a Little Teapot’. His lyrics are transcribed as follows:

```
I am a ninja short and stout–o
But when I throw my shuriken, hear me shout
[whispers] shu–shu, shu–shu...
Everybody together now,
When you throw your shuriken, what do you shout?
[whispers] shu–shu, shu–shu...
Now, when your friends ask you, Can you throw shuriken?’
What do you say?
Shur I can! Boom–tish!  (MNCC Final 2013 Video Author’s Transcript)
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The humour of the juxtaposition between ninja warrior and children’s television presenter relies on the competitor’s ability to recognisably recreate in performance both “Origami Cyclone” character and the children’s presenter character simultaneously.

It has been argued that innovation and recreation in performance should not be seen as oppositional but rather as interdependent (Schieffelin, 1998; Hughes-Freeland, 2007). In successful cosplay skit performances competitors use creative means to ‘accurately’
CHAPTER 7. PERFORMING THE SELF AS COSPLAY MASTER

recreate texts, and use elements of mimicry to create humorous ‘remixes’ of texts. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, the values of accuracy and creativity share an uneasy relationship within the practice. In some contexts they are represented as contradictory, in others as complementary. To perform a successful skit competitors must marry creativity and accuracy.

In both instances Wirru assembled costumes that appeared detailed and visually accurate to their source material. This not only showcased his ability to assembly high quality costumes, materially representing hours of offstage effort, but also enabled the audience to recognise and identify the characters he was portraying. Both skits also demonstrated their creator’s deep understanding and familiarity with the texts. In the first that knowledge was evident in the recreation of minute details from the scale of prop objects to the performance of lines of Japanese dialogue. In the second that knowledge was demonstrated through successful parody and juxtaposition as the character of “Origami Cyclone” was reimagined in new, non–canonical situations. To publically prove their mastery, competitors like Wirru must demonstrate that they can negotiate the values of accuracy and creativity in the assembly and performance of their skits.

7.5 The Distribution of Mastery

As performance theorists have emphasised, the influence and effects of performances are not confined to the frame of the event (Turner and Schechner, 1988; Cowan, 1990; Mendoza, 2000). Schulz (2000) in her study of beauty pageants in Mali notes that the impact of the event on the wider community was heightened by the broadcasting of the competition on national television as a greater number of people were able to access the event and discuss its representations. Similarly, the influence of cosplay competitions on the community of practice is distributed to a wider audience as performances are recorded and made accessible online through live streaming and videos which are later posted on organisers’ websites, personal blogs, Facebook and YouTube.

As Van Dijck (2008) has argued, recording culturally significant moments through video and photography actually reaffirms their significance. Competition performances are not only contests for recognition between individual practitioners but can also be identified as indexes of ‘good cosplay’ to be distributed to wider audiences. Performances which
are deemed by audiences, judges and convention audiences to assemble the elements of mastery are recreated digitally and distributed further, re-emphasising particular aesthetics and qualities as masterful cosplay.

This distribution is actively promoted and facilitated by the event organisers in a number of ways. Conventions such as AVCon organise official recordings of events, photography and video is explicitly allowed and encouraged on the part of the audience and opportunities for photography are actively incorporated into the onstage performances. Hosts provide instruction to competitors to pose at particular moments in the course of onstage action and occasionally even suggest or direct the competitors to perform specific poses. All sequences of competition action incorporate moments where competitors must pose for photographs. Tellingly, the most basic competition form, the parade, only requires competitors to pose for photographs without performing interviews or skits.

Even physical costume objects may be distributed. At Animania 2010 in Adelaide I was surprised to see some very familiar costumes displayed on mannequins in the main hall of the convention. The “Tidus”, “Riku” and “Waka” costumes worn by Wirru and his friends at SMASH and Manifest months earlier were now displayed as “prize-winning” cosplays in the main foyer of a convention in yet another Australian city.

Perth’s WaiCon in 2011 saw the public auction of one of Wirru’s handcrafted props. The day before he had won the day competition performing as “Snow Villiers” from Final Fantasy XIII where he had sat astride a prop motorcycle interlaced with repurposed shop mannequins. The event host announced that Wirru was unable to afford to ship the prop back to his home state so he had decided to auction the prop at the convention. The bidding was competitive and the item sold for several hundred dollars.

The role of convention photography in creating a sense of community associated with events is well-known by convention organisers. Some conventions go to considerable lengths to facilitate the creation of photographs and videos. AVCon’s photography team, for example, ensured that volunteer photographers were working in locations throughout each convention event I attended. Large scale convention events including cosplay competitions and the opening ceremony were photographed, videoed and livestreamed online on the convention’s website. Images and videos produced by the official team were uploaded onto the convention’s website and social media profiles throughout the
CHAPTER 7. PERFORMING THE SELF AS COSPLAY MASTER

duration of the convention and in the days following the event.

Cosplay mastery may be assembled in competition performances but that mastery is later broadcast to the wider community. Images and videos of Wirru’s performances and even his own handcrafted objects travelled far beyond the auditoriums where he competed. Elements of the performance such as costume, embodied action, skit and interview may be disassembled in distribution and evaluated out of context from one another. Audiences as much as judges or convention officials here play a role in creating masters as images and videos of non–winning entries that may have resonated with the audience are also recorded and shared online. The merits of these ‘fan–favourites’ are also discussed and compared with the official place–getters.

The distribution of mastery is also often carried out in person by the masters themselves. Many like Wirru, share their performances on their own sites and profiles, lecture newcomers at convention panels, and judge subsequent competitions. Furthermore, recognised cosplay masters within communities tend to be regular performers. One great performance does not a master necessarily make. Throughout my fieldwork I witnessed Wirru compete in competitions in Melbourne, Perth, Sydney and Brisbane. The grand final of the MNCC tended to feature many of the same competitors year after year. The assemblage and distribution of mastery must be recreated again and again in subsequent performances.

7.6 Conclusion: Assembling and Distributing a Master

The lack of many formal structures within the practice can make cosplay appear very egalitarian. However, as I have highlighted throughout this thesis certain, distinctive individuals do rise to prominence within the practice, wielding greater influence, positions of authority over novices, and greater visibility within the community. Depictions of mastery in more traditional or long-established communities of practice tend to depict the journey from novice to master as formalised and linear (Coy, 1989; Singleton, 1998). In the absence of formalised pathways, mastery in cosplay is achieved through a series of assembly and negotiation processes. This chapter has explored how cos-
players have the opportunity to gain master status through participating successfully in competitions.

Competitions are not the only means by which cosplayers can achieve mastery in Australia. However, throughout my fieldwork masterful competition performances often provided further opportunities for cosplayers for recognition within the community. Successful competitors often ran convention panels, contributed cosplay content to convention websites, and regularly became judges themselves. Wirru went on to later judge subsequent Grand Finals of the MNCC and to compete in the World Cosplay Summit in a team representing Australia. Demonstrations of mastery in competition performance are highly enmeshed with other forms of community success beyond the competition event.

Echoing discussions of negotiation in performance from previous chapters, the competitors described in this chapter must individually negotiate key cultural values and aesthetics in the attempt to create ‘masterful’ performances. These negotiations are undertaken by individual competitors but they are performed and redistributed to a broader community audience.

Chapter 6 explored the negotiation and assembly of cosplay performances in more the loosely structured and dynamic contexts of hallway performances. In contrast this chapter has focused on more structured competition contexts where spaces, roles and participation-frameworks appear to be more clearly defined. However, despite the more structured nature of competition performances, competitors as performers must still engage in a complex dance of negotiations between different cosplay values.

The formalised genre of the competition interview narrative provides a challenging task for the cosplayer as they must attempt to verbally narrate their skill and effort while maintaining a humble demeanour. In attempting to do this successfully cosplayers employ a variety of rhetorical techniques including humour and in-character performances to avoid appearing boastful. Personal effort, dedication and skill must be communicated in a detached manner.

The skit also provides serious challenges for competitors as they must negotiate values of accuracy and creativity. Their performances need to engage strongly with chosen inspirational source texts so that audiences can recognise their intertextuality and evaluate their accuracy. However, these representations also require considerable creativity on
the part of the contestant as they need to translate one medium to another and present the content in a manner which will entertain and engage audiences and judges.

To achieve mastery through participating in competitions cosplayers must assemble, negotiate and distribute themselves as masters. In their material, digital and embodied performances competitors must coherently embody the ideal of mastery. As the judge of one of Australia’s most prestigious competitions noted, champion competitors must demonstrate their proficiency in a range of onstage and offstage skills: the assembly of accurate and detailed costumes, their ability to plan and present entertaining and creative skits onstage and their ability to embody and promote cosplay values. Competitors need to convey all this in their onstage performance at competitions which may last, at most, about fifteen minutes.

Successful performances, deemed by judges or audiences to embody the qualities of mastery, are distributed to the wider community in the form of videos and photographs of the performance. In this way distributed competition performances are reflexive for cosplay communities of practice. They provide an opportunity for communities to engage with ‘masterful’ embodiments of cosplay values, beyond the original bounded performance contexts. Current masters provide other cosplayers with potential models of mastery which they in turn may attempt to recreate with variation. Like other things in cosplay, texts, costumes and performance genres, masters are things to be created and recreated in processes of assembly, negotiation and distribution.
Chapter 8

‘Pics, or It Didn’t Happen’: Photography and the (re)Creation of Cosplay

The phrase, ‘Pics or It Didn’t Happen’ is an internet meme popularly used on message boards, forums or comments attached to blog posts¹. The line is used by a commentator as a challenge to the validity of claims made by another: a demand that the poster present photographs as evidence that a particular event occurred. I observed this phrase being used occasionally by cosplayers on social media sites. In one example a cosplayer claimed to have recently obtained a tattoo. Another cosplayer responded to her post with the line, ‘Pics or It Didn’t Happen.’

The phrase contains many allusions to popular discourses about photography and its roles in contemporary Western societies in the climate of information revolution the positivist notion of photographs as ‘evidence’, the relationship between photographic images and memories of past events, and the strategic use of photographs in self-creation activities. Photographic practices play an extremely important role in the activities of cosplayers as they continually use digital photographs to represent themselves as practitioners, document cosplay experiences, and share cosplay knowledge with others. The phrase, ‘Pics or It Didn’t Happen’, can be applied to the community of practice

Figure 8.1: “Elf King” (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)
8.1. PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE (RE)CREATION OF COMMUNITY

itself; without photography and video activities cosplay would not happen.

In this final analytical chapter I explore cosplay photography and video activities as the ultimate illustration of assembly and distribution processes in the practice. Photographs are both assemblages and distributed objects (Gell, 1998; Halvaksz, 2010). Each image and video requires an assembly of practitioners and their skills and labour, is the product of materials and technologies, and references myriad other texts and images within the community. Using five photographic case studies I explore the diverse ways that objects, performances, practitioners and communities are interconnected through photographic practices. In the creation of online photographic profiles on social networking sites practitioners perform themselves as cosplayers; the sharing and ‘liking’ of photographs creates further ties between cosplayers and can be used by individuals to create distinctive presences within the community; photographs and video can be used to share skilled knowledge, and to create fantasies and memories. Redistributed and dispersed online, photographic images connect the material to the digital, individuals to communities and local communities to a global community of practice. Photography is a crucial element in the creation and recreation of cosplay.

As photographic images and practices are used in so many aspects of cosplay a comprehensive analysis of cosplay photography is not possible within the confines of this thesis. I have chosen instead to present a number of case–studies that exemplify some of the ways that cosplayers use photographs to define themselves and cosplay, and the means by which photographic practices create and structure the cosplay community. Throughout my fieldwork cosplayers, photographers and convention attendees would show me particular photographs and verbally or textually narrate the meanings and stories they attached to the images. In this chapter I aim to recreate that activity as I shall describe the production contexts of the image, how it was used and understood by members of the community and what it reveals about the relationships between photographic practices, practitioners and the practice of cosplay.

8.1 Photography and the (Re)Creation of Community

Photography plays many roles in the creation and recreation of the practice of cosplay and the communities associated with it. The fundamental importance of photography
to the practice of cosplay has been emphasised by several previous studies of cosplay (Okabe, 2012; Lunning, 2011; Rahman et al., 2012; Peirson-Smith, 2013). As visual anthropologist Edwards (2012, p.221) has argued, photographs do considerable ‘material work’. Drawing again on the work of Gell (1998) and others (Hirsch, 2004; Bell, 2008; Halvaksz, 2010; Edwards, 2012), I characterise digital cosplay photography and video as another type of assembled and distributed objects. Edwards (2012) has argued that Gell’s concept of distributed objects can be usefully applied to photographs because it recognises the multiplicity of photographs; that they can be dispersed and still be enmeshed within a network of social relations. Expanding on Gell (1998), Halvaksz (2010, p.415) argues that photographs are assemblages, drawing together photographer, subject, the material (or I would add, digital) nature of the photograph, the process, and the interpretation of the image. Like costumes and performances, cosplay photography is ephemeral, yet enduring. Photographs and videos are constantly produced and reproduced through assembly and distribution processes. After Gell (1998), I would argue that photographic images play an important role in an ‘art–nexus’ of cosplay; photographs and videos are both created by the community and actively work to create that community.

Photographs and videos in their status as assembled and distributed objects possess the capacity to extend and compress cultural space and time (Bell, 2008; Halvaksz, 2010; Hirsch, 2004). Hirsch (2004) has commented on the ability of photography, like ritual events, to assemble past, present and future. Photographs may recall past events to the present (Bell, 2008; Halvaksz, 2010), or may even be used to guide future action (Drazin and Frohlich, 2007). The distribution of cosplay photography in time and space is most commonly achieved through the display and exchange of images online. The remediation of photographs as digital images amplifies the capacity of photography to collapse the temporal and spatial distance between practitioners.

The exchange of photographic imagery, both digital and physical, can create relationships between individuals and communities (Van Dijck, 2008; Drazin and Frohlich, 2007; Pink, 2011; Edwards, 2012). Pink (2011) has argued that photography can play a crucial role in community-making as the display and sharing of images can connect individuals’ personal narratives to a wider community narratives. “Sharing” is the term commonly used to describe the act of uploading images on public websites, particularly on Facebook. Images and videos are “shared” by users. This term is particularly ap-
appropriate in describing the ways that photographic images and photographic labour are exchanged within Australian cosplay communities of practice. The exchange of cosplay photography operates along the lines of a ‘gift economy’ (Mauss and Cunnison, 1979) as practitioners share highly personalised images and personal efforts. Through the production, display and exchange of photographs and videos practitioners are enmeshed in processes of objectification which serve to recreate both practice and community.

8.2 The Photographer

I took this first photograph, Figure 8.2, at Oz Comic-Con Adelaide in March 2012. The subject is a cosplay photographer whose identity is unknown to me. The picture was taken in the food court area, a heterogeneous hallway space, where many cosplayers and photographers were ‘hanging-out’, chatting, taking photographs and being photographed. I was standing at a table with Julia and a group of other ACG members. I had recently photographed Julia and her friends and, as I was also wearing cosplay that day, they had been using my SLR camera to take pictures of me. Out of the corner of my eye I was watching other photographers and cosplayers who were standing only metres away. When the photographer knelt down to photograph the female cosplayer whose shadow is visible on the bottom right–hand side of the image, I was struck by the theatricality of the photographer’s pose and quickly decided to take the shot. This image also managed to capture another photographer, behind the main subject in the background, waiting as a cosplayer adjusts her cape in preparation to be photographed.

Cosplay photographers play vital roles in the creation and recreation of Australian cosplay communities of practice. To some extent cosplay photographers are invisible or hidden participants in the practice as it is the faces and bodies of cosplayers that are prominently displayed on Facebook, on websites, in videos and magazines. Cosplay is performative and cosplayers must be seen. In contrast, cosplay photographers are hidden behind their lenses. On Facebook and cosplay websites their participation in the practice is marked by their photographs of others. These images are often ‘water-marked’ with the name or ‘working name’ of the photographer, usually in the bottom–right corner of the image.

The ‘invisible’ nature of cosplay photographers occasionally leads to debates over the
CHAPTER 8. ‘PICS, OR IT DIDN’T HAPPEN’

Figure 8.2: Photographers
legal and ethical ownership of cosplay photographs. A particular, publicised example of this debate which was discussed by cosplayers and photographers within my local community of practice was the allegedly unauthorised use of photographs by the Syfy television reality series Heroes of Cosplay. In this example permission to use the images in the programme were apparently sought from the cosplayers but not the original photographers (Ardita, August 25, 2013). The confusion over the ownership of cosplay images does, however, highlight the close relationship between photographers and performers and suggest that cosplay photographs are collaborative creations or ‘assemblages’ in Halvaksz’s (2010) sense.

The collaborative nature of cosplay photography means that photographer biographies are often deeply interrelated with cosplayers and cosplay organisations. As the trajectories of practitioners and practices can be considered interdependent (Shove et al., 2007), the close social relationships between individual photographers and cosplayers re-emphasise the close association between the practices of cosplay and photography. As with cosplayers, individual participants in cosplay photography may engage in the practice in different ways and to differing extents. Some photographers attend occasional events while others are regular participants, running photography websites or volunteering their skills at conventions. Cosplay photographers become involved in the practice through a variety of circumstances and motivations.

In interview, cosplay photographer and head of AVCon’s photography team, Emmanuel described how he embarked on his cosplay photography career. He attended an AVCon in 2010, accompanying some friends who were participating in a videogame tournament. A keen photographer since childhood, Emmanuel brought along his camera and was impressed by his first encounter with cosplay.

And I had a look around and I thought, ‘This is really amazing: the atmosphere, the costumes.’ (Emmanuel, Author’s Interview 2012)

He decided to join the ACG in early 2011 and befriended a number of cosplayers. It was at this time that he decided to try cosplaying himself, performing several Doctor Who cosplays, including the “Ninth” and “Tenth Doctors”. He participated in a number of events as both cosplayer and photographer before deciding to approach Team AVCon to apply for a position on their volunteer photography team. Like the participants in communities of practice described by (Lave and Wenger, 1991), Emmanuel’s social
status within the community improved as his participation increased.

Within a year I went from having never been to a convention, I had no idea what cosplay was, to being part of the group.

(Emmanuel, Author’s Interview 2012)

Emmanuel’s story also illustrates how the division between cosplayer and cosplay photographer can often be blurred; many practitioners who identify primarily as ‘cosplayers’ will photograph themselves or others for many different purposes, some of which will be outlined in this chapter. As explored in Chapter 6, at a specific event such as a convention or photo shoot a participant may change roles between photographer and subject.

As with cosplayers, the role, identity and practice of photographers are closely associated with material things, in this instance gear. In their study of amateur digital photographers Shove et al. (2007) noted that practitioner biographies were intimately tied to their equipment. The photographer in the image above is using an unidentifiable SLR camera with a detachable lens. At events, especially large conventions, many different types of devices are used to photograph cosplayers: smart phones, tablets, compact cameras and SLRs.

The relationship between the cosplay photographer’s gear and their perceived depth of engagement with the practice is particularly important. Longer term participants, who self-identified predominantly as photographers, usually owned and used digital SLR cameras. For example, Emmanuel, as head of AVCon’s photographic team, used two professional-standard Canon brand camera bodies with an assortment of lenses. While he told me that he had purchased several items second hand, the cost of the gear he regularly used was several thousand dollars. As with cosplay, those who wish to ‘seriously’ participate in the practice must be able and willing to spend a considerable sum. In addition to the financial outlay, those aiming to use SLR cameras also needed to commit more time to learning how to operate their equipment. I discovered this myself as I learnt to use an SLR over the duration of my fieldwork.

Cosplay photographers may outlay considerable funds to participate in their craft, but, like cosplayers, they are not guaranteed any financial returns on their purchases. While I did encounter online discussions on international websites of cosplay photographers who charged fees for their services, all the photographers that I regularly encountered
8.2. THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Figure 8.3: Photographers at Oz Comic-Con (Photograph by Patrick Korbel)
during fieldwork did not photograph cosplay for monetary payment. Instead photographers and cosplayers tend to relate as co–creators, exchanging labour and engaging in mutual promotion. Returning to a very familiar theme of material culture studies in anthropology, I would argue that this form of labour exchange bares a closer relationship to gift giving in the sense of Mauss and Cunnison (1979) than the exchange between professional photographer and client. Within cosplay communities of practice photographs and videos are not typically treated as commodities, but instead through the processes of objectification I have described throughout this thesis they are intimately connected with practitioners, performances and processes and rendered into ‘inalienable objects’ (Weiner, 1992). Similarly, the labour of both photographer and cosplayer is not commoditised but instead is viewed more as a shared experience, an act of friendship or community creation.

In the photo shoots and convention photography that I participated in during fieldwork most of the photographic work was performed by friends, friends of informants and acquaintances. Often times when attending conventions with other cosplayers, one member of our group would know a photographer attending that day and we would deliberately organise to meet up with them so that they could photograph our costumes. Sometimes we worked out a direct exchange of labour. For example, cosplay group The Con Artists spent a day shooting in the heart of retail district of Adelaide with local photography team I Got Superpowers. We agreed to assist them by performing in a cosplay version of the dance meme video, “Harlem Shake”, which we shot at a local comic book store. The store owners and workers knew the photographers and were happy to let us use the store for half an hour, even consenting to dance wildly in the video. The photographers then assisted The Con Artists by helping us shoot a promotional video for our upcoming performance.

However, like other forms of gift–giving this exchange of labour does create a burden of obligation. Cosplayers who posed for photographs had an expectation that they would be able to access and view these photographs, almost instantly after they had been created. Emmanuel described how he felt pressured by cosplayers to post his photographs
online very soon after events:

People will get on my Facebook page and be like, ‘Where are the photos?’ Man, I haven’t even got home yet! I seriously had messages before I’d got home from an event because we went to an after party. So many people asking me where the photos are and it’s 2am in the morning.

(Emmanuel, Author’s Interview 2012)

According to Emmanuel, cosplayers expect that they will be depicted in a flattering manner and that the photographic imagery will be of a high quality with no obvious technical flaws. He often chooses not to upload images that will discredit his technical abilities or portray the cosplayer in a less than flattering manner. However, he reported that this choice sometimes upset cosplayers who knew that they had been photographed and anticipated viewing their images on Facebook.

The co–creative nature of the relationship between cosplayers and photographers was regularly acknowledged by cosplayer photographers.

It’s the photographer’s job to make the cosplayer look great and make them feel good about themselves and their cosplay.

(IGotSuperpowers, Author’s Questionnaire 2012)

Photographers from Adelaide–based cosplay and pop culture website IGotSuperpowers explicitly saw their role as promoting and creating a cosplay community:

C: What is the most enjoyable aspect of being involved with the website?

IGSP: There are many. But one thing that comes to mind first is community engagement. It’s good to see the fans or our readers engage with us not necessarily through comments but through social media sharing in the form of LIKE, FACEBOOK SHARE and TWEET. It tells us that we’re doing a great job and that it means something to the community.
We started taking photos of cosplayers when we first attended AVCon in 2011. Our aim was to give the “underdogs” or lesser known cosplayers a chance at stardom when we showcase their photos on our website and social media channels. We’ve received such a great positive feedback from the fans that we’ve never stopped since.

(IGotSuperpowers, Author’s Questionnaire 2012)

The sentiments expressed in this quotation emphasises the co–creative role of cosplayers and photographers in shaping the practice. In these comments the photographers in fact attribute greater importance to photographers as they are viewed as being able to elevate the status of individual cosplayers and create them as ‘star’ practitioners. Photographers can promote the work of individual cosplayers by capturing it and sharing it online. As the following sections will demonstrate both cosplayers and photographers perform and, indeed, create themselves as practitioners through the display of photographic images on social networking sites.

**8.3 The Profile Picture**

The picture depicted in Figure 8.4 is a photograph of me in cosplay as “Kusuri–uri”. The picture, which I cropped from a larger image using the digital editing program GIMP, was displayed as my ‘Profile Picture’ on Facebook for several years during part of fieldwork and the writing–up periods of my thesis project. The photograph was taken by my friend Corey with the assistance of my partner Patrick at the Adelaide Himeiji Garden as part of a pre–planned photo shoot in 2011.

This shoot took place in early December on a day where the temperature reached around thirty–eight degrees Celsius. The shoot ran from around eleven o’clock to half–past twelve and the bright and scorching sun is evident in other photographs that were taken on that day in bright blue skies and high contrast shadows. Wearing T–shirts and jeans, Corey and Patrick were uncomfortable but in several layers of kimono I was boiling. The photograph does not show any evidence of the amount that I was sweating. My makeup looks unblemished and does not reflect the physical sensation of the makeup turning to liquid on my face.
8.3. THE PROFILE PICTURE

Figure 8.4: Ethnographer as “Kusuri–uri” (Photograph by Corey Newcombe)
The selection of the location required considerable preparatory work on my part. The series in which the Kusuri-uri character features *Mononoke* (Toei Animation, 2007) and *Ayakashi: Samurai Horror Tales* (Toei Animation, 2006) are both set in a fantastical imagining of Edo-period Japan. I wanted to photograph myself in cosplay in a location that reflected the setting of the series. Twenty-first-century Adelaide does not possess many locations that visually reflect Edo-period Japan; however, drawing upon by own knowledge as a local I knew of one place in the city that I believed would provide a suitable location for the shoot—the Adelaide Himeiji Garden.

With a camera, a tripod and two lighting umbrellas we spent over an hour in the garden. We took photographs in a number of different places and using different props including a paper parasol I had purchased from a local Japanese goods outlet and my hand-crafted prop sword. For one photograph I perched precariously on a small stone step in the middle of a pond. Patrick manipulated the lighting umbrellas and Corey took the shots. We attracted a few sideways glances from some non-costumed visitors to the garden. From the shoot Corey gave me a CD–Rom with about fifty images he had selected and edited.

From these images I selected one of the photographs to use as my profile image on Facebook. I chose this image for a number of reasons. In the photograph I was cosplaying a character I liked from an anime I enjoyed. The image was aesthetically pleasing by cosplay photo shoot genre standards: the costume and my performance appeared in-character, accurate and detailed; the subject was in focus and the contrast was neither too low nor high. The photograph also represented the skills I had acquired in the assembly and performance of the costume. It recalled memories of events at which I had worn the costume, including the photo shoot, and expressed my relationship to others who were present at the event and would recognise the costume when displayed online.

My choice of Facebook profile picture in this instance reflects the way that other cosplayers within Australian communities of practice use digital photographic images to construct performances of cosplaying self online. Early in 2012 I attended an ACG social meet-up at an inner-city pub in Adelaide to chat with the costumers and conduct an informal interview with long-term costumer and ACG member, Catherine. Catherine, responding to my request for photos of earlier costumes, had brought along a published photo booklet. It was about A5 size, well-presented like the kind printed at photography stores. The photographs depicted Catherine wearing a number of different costumes at
different events. The revelation of this photo booklet provoked some comments from her friends who were looking on. Comments such as: ‘You’re so old fashioned. What about a phone?’ ‘What about Facebook?’

The reactions of Catherine’s friends to her ‘old-fashioned’ choice to display her photographs in printed material form for this interview hints at the ubiquitous role that the social networking site Facebook plays in the activities of local cosplayers. The cosplayers that I interacted with during fieldwork, including Catherine, all used Facebook accounts on which they actively displayed costume images. Sometimes they additionally held memberships with other image sharing sites such as Flickr, Tumblr, deviantArt and international cosplay-specific sites such as Cosplay.com. Other non-cosplaying participants in the cosplay community of practice convention attendees, convention organisers, cosplay photographers also used Facebook to display pictures of costumes and comment upon them. Australian pop-culture conventions and cosplay competitions also had a prominent Facebook presence.

Many cosplayers who I encountered during fieldwork used pictures of themselves in costume as their profile picture on Facebook. The profile picture image is the most immediate and personalised depiction of self on Facebook. According to the site’s current layout at the time of writing not only is the profile image displayed above a user’s timeline on their own page but the image acts as an icon, representing the user in messages and comments. The profile picture is not merely a representation of self but an ongoing, strategically constructed performance of self and distributed extension of self.

As Miller (2011) and other studies of the social networking site (Horst, 2009; Urry and Larsen, 2011) have argued, Facebook presentation is a performance of self. Miller (2011, p.177-8) argues that this depiction of self can be continuous with an offline presentation or alternate to an offline presentation. At first glance it may appear that cosplayers, dressed as outlandish characters, are presenting themselves in a manner separate from enduring, everyday identities. While cosplayers may use images depicting themselves as an alternate character, through the repeated display of cosplay photographs over time the cosplayer constructs themselves as an active participant in the community, a cosplayer. After Gell (1998) I would argue that cosplay photographs and videos displayed on Facebook, particularly profile pictures, act as distributed cosplaying selves for through the display of cosplaying images cosplayers visually perform themselves as cosplayers, demonstrating their skills and practitioner biographies.
While objects possess ‘cultural biographies’ (Kopytoff, 1986), the personal history or biography of an individual can also be told through objects (Hoskins, 1998). Through uploading photographs of their cosplaying activities online cosplayers create digital biographies of their cosplaying activities. The online display of cosplay portraits are performances of performances. These images broadcast to other cosplayers and wider audiences the user’s status as a cosplayer. Photographs taken at photo shoots, conventions or other events also record and demonstrate the cosplayers’ participation in community events and reaffirm their social relations with those who were also present. ‘Progress’ pictures of costumes taken during the assembly process portray the cosplayer as a craftsperson who has put time and effort into their construction activities.

Renee, for example, explicitly saw her collection of cosplay photographs on Facebook as a portfolio that represented her costuming activities.

All my photos of all my costumes, they’re on Facebook. If you need any photos to show anyone you can go through my Facebook as much as you like and take as many photos as you want to use for this. That’s where all my photos are. I don’t have physical copies of them. I don’t have them saved on my phone. If anyone says, ‘Oh can I see the costumes you make?’ I say, ‘Yeah, sure. Facebook.’ That’s the technology of today that we’re all so linked into the media so that if I met someone who came to a meeting like this and asked if I had a portfolio then I would be like, ‘Well, here you go, here’s my Facebook page let’s scroll through it.’ When people ask me for a show–reel for a job I say, ‘Find me on Facebook and you’ll see everything.’

(Renee, Author’s Interview 2012)

From Renee’s statement it is clear that the display of personal cosplay images Facebook does not only provide a record of past participation but can actively provide further participation opportunities. As detailed in Chapter 2, my contact with participants in Australian communities of practice broadened considerably after I began posting images of my own cosplaying activities. Community members who organise events regularly send out invitations to cosplayers on Facebook who have been ‘tagged’ in photographs of previous events. Photographs of one’s cosplay performances therefore can become an entry ticket to future events.

For these reasons cosplayers are careful to represent themselves and their in the best pos-
sible light on Facebook. These distributed ‘cosplayer selves’ are also strategically presented performances in Goffman’s (1990) sense. Cosplayers within Australian communities of practice tend to use photographs that would be considered aesthetically pleasing according to values of the community. For example, in that image my “Kusuri-uri” costume appears detailed and accurate. Intricate face makeup, handcrafted jewellery and even painted nails are on show. The colours and shapes match those of the original character design from the anime. The photograph itself similarly conforms to aesthetics expected in cosplay photo shoot genre photography. The image is in focus, well–lit and the background serves to enhance the character. In choosing to present themselves through aesthetically pleasing images cosplayers are not only strategically displaying themselves in the best possible light but are also recreating and reaffirming community aesthetics. Murray (2008) has argued that in selecting photographic images to display online, users define and recreate shared aesthetic standards. Images of ‘good’ cosplay are selected and represented online.

8.4 Final Fantasies

The image below, Figure 8.5, depicts a wedding that took place in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens. In a public park, in front of rows of white seating, a couple’s hands are joined together by a priestess dressed in white. This “wedding” was an improvised cosplay performance enacted as part of an organised Final Fantasy Cosplay Day in the park. The bride and groom of the couple are cosplayers recreating the roles of “Tidus” and “Yuna”, characters who are love–interests from Final Fantasy X. The cosplayers playing Tidus and Yuna were themselves also a ‘real–life’ couple. To the left, the groomsmen are (L to R) adult “Hope Estheim” from Final Fantasy XIII–2 and “Cloud Strife” from Final Fantasy VII. The bridesmaids are (L to R) “Tifa” from Final Fantasy VII and “Vanille” from Final Fantasy XIII. Dressed in my “White Mage” robes and representing a magical or spiritual character from earlier games in the franchise, I was considered the closest proxy for a priest. The performance was devised through a collaboration of cosplayers and photographers and was staged for the purpose of being photographed.

Cosplay performances and photographic activities are closely entwined. Photographic and video practices are involved in recording and remembering cosplay events but they
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Figure 8.5: Final fantasies (Photograph by Nathan from IGotSuperpowers)
also play a significant role in creating and promoting these events. Like cosplayers in Japan, China and the United States (Lunning, 2011; Okabe, 2012), participants in Australian communities of practice regularly organise events for the explicit purpose of creating photographic images and videos. Photography facilitates the assembly of local practitioners in a very literal sense.

Throughout the period of my fieldwork cosplay photography was regularly used to promote events, both larger events staged by organisations like AVCon, Manifest, SMASH and the Australian Costumers Guild and smaller parties and gatherings. Dustin, the promotions co–ordinator for AVCon, argued that this was a deliberate strategy:

> At the end of the day I need to capture the vision of my audience and cosplay does it. I could write the most amazing press release about AVCon benefiting the South Australian economy and it would get picked up by The Messenger in a small little paragraph. I get my promotions team dressed as characters from Alice in Wonderland and I put them in Rundle Mall, I get front page. Cosplay is the easiest way to get people to recognise what AVCon is. It is a bunch of fun people, big smiles, bright costumes having fun outside and that’s why when it comes to promotions I’ll put as many photos as I can. I’ll put as many stories as I can of people just dressing up and having a whole bunch of fun. And at the end of the day that’s AVCon.

(Dustin, Author’s Interview 2010)

In the lead up to conventions and other events cosplayers would often display pictures of their costumes “in–progress”, showing construction processes and inviting others to comment, Figure 8.6. These photographs not only enabled cosplayers to document and promote their personal activities but also created a sense of anticipation in relation to the upcoming event among community members.

Most often this promotional imagery was displayed and distributed through Facebook. In a recent study of the use of Facebook in Trinidad, Miller (2011) notes that the social networking site is used to create and facilitate offline events. The Final Fantasy Cosplay Day in Adelaide was created for the purpose of creating performances, sociality and photography. The event was organised and publicised online through Facebook. Two local cosplayers created an Event page which was later displayed on AVCon’s official page, thereby notifying anyone who had ‘liked’ the AVCon page. Various well–known
Figure 8.6: Julia’s belt
cosplayers and photographers had been ‘invited’ to attend the event and those who were planning to be there had their profiles listed as ‘attending.’ In the days and weeks leading up to the event the page was also used as a site of discussion of the event where guests could comment and ask organisers questions. Online discussions on this page enabled the organisers to promote a sense of anticipation about the event and provided a means of connecting potential participants who were planning to attend.

The event itself was held on a scorching hot Saturday afternoon and was attended by around thirty cosplayers and fifteen photographers. Participants shared food and drink in the shade, chatting casually between photographs. Individual and group shots of cosplayers were taken. Sometimes a cosplayer would stage a pose for all the photographers present. At other times photographers and cosplayers would leave the main party in pairs or small groups for different locations around the park to create more individualised shots.

Photo shoots like the Final Fantasy Cosplay Day are events explicitly created to facilitate the production of photographic images. The genre of cosplay photo shoot photography is highly performative as photographer and cosplayer work together to create fictional fantasies. Similar to the in–character performances described in Chapters 6 and 7, photo shoot images are typically framed as being ‘make believe’, as taking place within the characters’ fictional universe(s), or another setting removed from everyday life. This framing is created by performers and photographers through the use of cropping, digital editing and mise–en–scene elements. Non–relevant material that could break the illusory nature of the image, such as power–lines, rubbish bins, non–costumed passers–by, out of character performances, is removed from the image. Theorists have emphasised the improvisatory nature of performance (e.g. Cowan (1990); Schieffelin (1998)), and is certainly true of cosplay photo shoots. Photo shoots are improvisatory assemblages which involve cosplayers and photographers playing with found objects, texts and costumed performers. The performance created in the photograph above was assembled in a matter of fifteen minutes through the discussions of participants.

The flowers, rows of white wooden seating (bedecked with ribbon), and the rolled up carpet (barely visible) were not props brought to the location by cosplayers but were rather ‘found objects’ that inspired and were used by our cosplaying group. The Botanic Gardens are a favourite local site for weddings ceremonies, photography and receptions. A photographer attending the cosplay event found the seating set–up in preparation for a
wedding and spontaneously suggested the idea that a group of us stage a ‘Final Fantasy’ wedding photograph.

The subjects in the photograph, the cosplayers, were themselves ‘found objects’ for the purpose of the image. The photographers selected us from the group of cosplayers based on the characters we were portraying. There were discussions as to which characters would best fulfil the role of groomsmen, bridesmaids and priest.

The photograph itself can be considered a ‘playful’ use of multiple texts and images as it combines intertextual references to the Final Fantasy game franchise, Western wedding rituals, and the ‘real life’ relationships of the cosplay performers themselves. The subjects in the photograph, the cosplayers, were themselves “found objects” for the purpose of the image.

The cosplayers portraying the bride and groom were an actual couple who had come to the event dressed “Tidus” and “Yuna”, love interests from Final Fantasy X. For those present at the event and many who later viewed the image online on Facebook, the image was interpreted as a performance of their status as a couple on several levels.

The groomsmen’s roles were filled by cosplayers portraying two young male characters from the franchise. They were chosen as they were deemed to be the right age to be friends with the groom despite the fact that the characters derive from different games and have never canonically met in their respective texts. In the photograph these male cosplayers are slumping in awkward poses while holding paper cups, suggesting an attitude of drunkenness. While drunken revelry would be considered very ‘out–of–character’ for “Cloud” and “Hope”, this behaviour was viewed by photo shoot participants as very ‘in–character’ for both groomsmen at a wedding celebration and the two cosplayers themselves. For those familiar with the games, Western weddings and/or the cosplayers depicted the humour of the performance derives from the juxtaposition between the sombre, serious nature of the characters as they appear in the canonical texts and the drunken behaviour they are exhibiting as groomsmen.

This playfulness continued in new contexts when the image was shared online on Facebook several days later. The images was tagged and ‘liked’. The comments posted in relation to the image continued the performance of the photograph. Commenters made jokes about whether the characters would get drunk at a wedding or commented on the suitability of a ‘real life’ couple portraying “Tidus” and “Yuna”. The image was shared
by many of the participants and their friends.

The creation of photo shoot imagery and its subsequent distribution online organises and creates performance opportunities. Photographers and cosplayers together assemble playful fantasies where elements of pre–existing texts and features of ‘real–life’ are intertwined. The distribution of such images online on Facebook and other photo sharing sites creates the opportunity for further members of the community to engage with the performative fantasies created in the image. As the image is shared and interacted with online the performance itself is distributed (Gell, 1998) across time and space and the relationships between shoot participants and online viewers are reinforced.

8.5 Doctor Who??!

This photograph, Figure 8.7, is a head and shoulders portrait of my friend Ashton cosplaying as “Doctor Who”, specifically the “Eleventh Doctor” as portrayed by Matt Smith. The photograph was taken by Mark, a cosplayer, cosplay photographer, member of the ACG and friend to Julia. It was taken in the morning on the first day AVCon in 2012. The convention setting is barely evident in the photograph as the camera’s focus is entirely on the subject with the background convention contexts blurred in the aesthetic effect known as bokeh. To the right of the subject is the sleeve of Daniel’s “Captain Jack Harkness” trench coat which has not been entirely cut out of the frame.

In the photograph Ashton is wearing the outfit he wore to both days of the convention. He had found the jacket at an op-shop and the rest of the clothing, including the small red leather bow tie was his own. Tucked into his breast pocket and clearly visible in the photograph is a green Sonic Screwdriver prop. The green Sonic Screwdriver is a prop exclusively associated with the “Eleventh Doctor” character. This particular version was a piece of mass–produced merchandise which was owned by Julia who had purchased it online. Leading up to the convention the group had discussed and planned who would lend Ashton a version of the prop. Daniel also owned a similar replica but it was deemed too small for accuracy. In the week before the convention Ashton and other members of the group had also searched costume shops and hatters in Adelaide looking for the character’s iconic red fez, worn in several episodes, but we discovered that due to the popularity of the character it had sold out. On the second day of the convention Julia
Figure 8.7: Ashton as “Doctor Who” (Original photograph by Maetography)
managed to borrow him a fez from another cosplayer. In this way Ashton’s costume was assembled from objects owned and sourced by a number of cosplayers.

The photograph was uploaded to Facebook the evening of the day after the convention. It had been edited and re–sized by Mark who sent the image to Julia who uploaded the image to The Con Artists Facebook page. Julia, writing as the administrator for the Facebook page, added the caption, ‘Doctor Who??!’ and tagged Ashton as the subject of the photograph. The photograph could now be viewed by anyone accessing the public Con Artists page. Ashton and the entirety of his Facebook friends list were notified that Ashton had been tagged in the photograph and were provided with a link to the image.

As evident in Figure 8.7, the picture received 22 ‘likes’ and six comments within little over twenty–four hours. Every time that the picture was ‘liked’ or commented on Facebook would notify Ashton and every other member of The Con Artists. Those who posted comments on the photograph would also receive notification if other Facebook users posted subsequent comments. As I sat online observing the post–convention photograph sharing and discussion I was regularly receiving notifications that this photograph was being viewed and appraised.

The photograph of Ashton as the “Eleventh Doctor” and the activities it generated demonstrate how the sharing of photographs on Facebook creates relationships between cosplayers. Recent visual and material culture approaches have argued that the sharing and exchanging of photography both physical objects and digital images can play a significant role in the creation and maintenance of social relations (Drazin and Frohlich, 2007; Van Dijck, 2008; Edwards, 2012). ‘Pixelated images, like spoken words, circulate between individuals and groups to establish and reconfirm bonds,’ (Van Dijck, 2008, p.62). In sharing digital cosplay photographs on Facebook practitioners not only objectify their relationships with photographers and perform themselves as cosplayers but through the use of Facebook’s ‘tag’, ‘like’ and ‘comment’ functions cosplayers establish tangible links with other members of the community of practice.

As well as allowing users to display and share photographic images, Facebook also encourages users to interact with images through a variety of different functions. The ‘tag’ function on Facebook allows users to identify people depicted in photographs that they upload and display. When cosplayers, photographers and attendees post albums
and photographs on social media and image-sharing sites they often identify themselves and other subjects using a ‘tag’ feature. After attending conventions and other events, I often discovered notifications from Facebook informing me that I had been ‘tagged’ in the photographs of other cosplayers. For example, one of Julia’s friends would upload their pictures of a convention and then Julia would identify herself, me and other friends and acquaintances. Additionally, I would often be contacted by friends of informants, other cosplayers and attendees who I had met at events. They were able to identify and locate me through pictures in which I had been tagged. They would offer ‘friend requests’, allowing for further exchanges of images and messages. In this way I was able to connect with wider and wider circles of local and interstate cosplayers.

The photo sharing functions of Facebook facilitate the development of an ever expanding web of practitioners and audiences. However, these functions also serve as a digital marker of cosplay success and enable cosplayers to engage in a struggle for ‘fame’ (Miller, 2000) and ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu, 1990). In an early study of personal websites in Trinidad, precursors to social networking profiles, Miller (2000) argues that the sharing of personalised content can be a means to growing status or ‘fame’. ‘What they [users] desire most is to create a circuit of sociality in which they can grow their fame as the fame of their individual website among a group of peers’ (Miller, 2000, p.17). Like Ashton, cosplayers whose photographs receive multiple views, ‘likes’ and positive comments are better regarded among members of the community than those whose photographs go unnoticed. Other members of the group were slightly surprised and maybe a little envious of Ashton’s online success:

Then there was Ashton who went as the Doctor to AVCon and he got all the photos and all the people gave him the attention and I like the attention on me. So when it was Supanova and there was no Ashton, I got to have all the fun photos that Ashton might have had! (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

The sharing and displaying of photographs online can also be an agonistic activity, as members struggle for distinction within cosplay communities. While various sites and organisations run occasional dedicated online cosplay competitions, far more common is the everyday, tacitly understood spirit of competitiveness between cosplayers over who is attracting the most online attention from spectators and other cosplayers. Cosplayers I encountered did not usually describe their online displays of cosplay photography as a competitive, emphasising instead ideas of sharing and community. The ethics
of modesty and casualness performed by competitors in onstage cosplay competitions is again reflected here. However, in interviews cosplayers would often mention others cosplaying friends and acquaintances who they believed were constantly seeking online attention for their photographs and videos. Daniel was one cosplayer who openly admitted enjoying online attention and explicitly viewed this attention as a measure of cosplay success:

C: You’ve already touched on some of these things but how do you feel about being photographed or filmed?

D: I love it now. Day one, first convention ever at AVCon, I was a bit...err... Where are you putting this photo, giant pony? But now it’s almost a measure of success so the more photos I’m tagged in means the better my costume was. If I can get a picture of me on the Supanova homepage because my costume was a really good cosplay then that means my cosplay was awesome. (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

Throughout my fieldwork experience there were regular occasions when I found myself participating in this competitive aspect. The evening after a day out in cosplay at a convention I would be on Facebook on my home computer waiting for pictures of the event to be posted by friends and fellow attendees. While my motivations were primarily ethnographic I often found myself experiencing feelings of excitement and satisfaction upon viewing positive comments and ‘likes’ on pictures of my costumes. Conversely, an absence of photographs or videos of myself led to feelings of disappointment and worries about what was ‘wrong’ with my costume. Occasionally, I caught myself tallying the number of photographs of cosplaying friends displayed online after an event and comparing them to the number in which I featured.

This relationship between the number of ‘likes’ on a cosplay photograph and the merit of the practitioner can be explained due to the photograph’s nature as a form of distributed personhood (Gell, 1998). The objectifications at work in digital cosplay photography, as described in the previous sections of this chapter, mean that in evaluating or ‘liking’ an image of Facebook a person is evaluating or liking the costume, the performance or the work of the cosplayer. This sentiment is echoed in the above quotation from Daniel.
Returning to the photograph of Ashton as the “Eleventh Doctor”, the expected relationship between Facebook fame and cosplayer competency provides an explanation as to why certain other cosplayers were annoyed by Ashton’s success. Despite the very basic nature of the costume, particularly in comparison to some of the more elaborately assembled or handmade outfits worn by other members of the group, the photograph received overwhelmingly positive attention. Discussing the costume with Ashton, other members of the group and cosplayers later in interview the success of the costume was attributed to Ashton’s accurate physical resemblance to Matt Smith:

He wasn’t cosplaying; he just happened to be out for the weekend with a fez! (Daniel, Author’s Interview 2012)

Ashton’s success was attributed to luck as opposed to competency. Despite the best intentions of cosplayers images can be interpreted differently, efforts can go unrecognised and fame can be fickle.

8.6 Tutorial Photography

This image in Figure 8.8 depicts a very different use of photographic images in a cosplay performance. I took this photograph during a cosplay leather-working panel held at SMASH in 2013. It depicts the presenter of the panel standing in front of a screen displaying a PowerPoint presentation slide. On the slide are photographs of costume objects, created by the presenter, in various stages of being applied with ‘antique’ which dyes or stains the leather. The images would be visible to nearly everyone seated in the audience of the panel. The presenter is explaining the process and importance of ‘antiquing.’

Photographs are regularly used by cosplayers in teaching and learning activities. They are used to illustrate panel presentations and online tutorials and feature in published tutorials in printed cosplay magazines. These photographs represent an entirely different genre of cosplay photography, one that is not usually celebrated within the community or represented in mainstream media. Unlike in convention and photo shoot photography, people are not usually the subjects of these images. Instead objects, costume parts, tools, household appliances, are the focus of the camera. Many of these photographs are cre-
Figure 8.8: Panel with PowerPoint slide
ated in cosplayers’ homes and may show tiny uncropped glimpses of domestic spaces, the bathrooms, bedrooms and garages where these images were captured. In contrast to the aesthetic emphasis of other genres of cosplay photography which emphasise appealing lighting and accurate framing, these images are often mundane snapshots.

This genre of photography plays an important role in the distribution of cosplay knowledge and skills and facilitates the development of relationships between local practitioners and a globalised community of practice. In the absence of formal schools or classes cosplay skills and knowledge can be distributed through a wide variety of means. In some instances this occurs in face to face interactions. Renee, for example, described how a friend taught her the basics of corsetry in her own home as they worked with the materials together and drank coffee.

While the learning of cosplay skills can occur through this kind physical personal interaction, cosplay skill transmission does not always occur in face–to–face contexts. The variety and specificity of cosplay skills needed to complete a particular project often requires a cosplayer to seek out knowledge and advice from cosplayers beyond his or her immediate local circle of acquaintances. Usually this involves the cosplayer searching for information online on costume and prop forums, craft websites, Pintrest and YouTube. For example, Daniel decided that he wanted to create a crepe hair goatee beard for his cosplay as “Littlefinger” from HBO’s Game of Thrones. He had no experience in working with crepe hair or its adhesive, spirit gum, and needed direction and visual instruction in its application. None of the cosplayers in Daniel’s immediate circle had created facial hair with the product so he decided to seek information online. He recounted to me that he had discovered a video tutorial on YouTube that showed professional make–up artist explaining how to create a beard. He watched the video multiple times before day the event at which he was to wear the beard and attempted to recreate the technique.

Cosplayers regularly use video and photographic tutorials created by professional make–up artists, costumiers, milliners, property and special–effects artists but cosplayers themselves will also create their own tutorials for the use of other practitioners. In creating my “Allen Schezar” costume I used a photographic tutorial posted on a cosplayer’s blog which explained how to create puffed sleeves. In the written text the cosplayer described the creation of puffed sleeves for her “Hilde” cosplay from the game series Soul Calibur. The blog post included a series of embedded images including photographs of the
pattern, the cut fabric, the gathering of the fabric through stitching and the sleeve being sewn into the arm hole. Photographs also depicted the cosplayer wearing the completed outfit and carrying prop weaponry.

When attempting the most difficult aspect of the sleeve, the gathering of the fabric through hand stitching, I worked in front of my computer with the page displayed on-screen so I could compare my work to the depictions of the process in the tutorial. I observed the shape, checked the space between the stitched to visually confirm that I was performing the technique correctly. Through the use of photographs I was able to materially recreate another cosplayer’s work in another time and location.

Like the competitors’ construction narratives described in Chapter 7, photographic sequences allow the viewer to trace an object through its transformations. Returning to the original example of panel photograph, the images displayed on the PowerPoint slide depict the costume object at various stages in its assembly process. Placed in relation to one another and the finished object itself, which the presenter displayed during the panel, these photographs play with cultural time by enabling viewers to imagine the object at various stages, not only in its completed form. This sense of sequence is essential for cosplayers attempting to recreate the same processes at home as practitioners need to recreate each stage in order if they want their finished assembly to resemble that of the original cosplayer. Furthermore, in performing techniques such as antiquing or gathering cosplayers must pay careful attending to visual features colour, shape, spacing. In the absence of face–to–face demonstration photographs and videos provide a visual model for the accurate reproduction of techniques.

Makovicky (2010) in her study of Slavic lace–making practices has argued that records of craft practice including patterns and images can play a role in the distribution of practices across time and locations. Through the uploading of tutorial pages and videos cosplay knowledge and techniques can be accessed by cosplayers online. Cosplayers in Adelaide can access tutorials created by practitioners in Sydney, Kyoto or Vancouver. If the hosting site continues to run a tutorial can be available for years. Tutorials that are recognised as useful by members of the community may be shared by cosplayers, either privately through personal recommendation or publically by posting a link to the tutorial on cosplay forums and sites.

The distribution of cosplay knowledge through photographic tutorials may initially ap-
PEAR a rather sterile and overtly formalised means of communicating crafts skills. In relation to lacemaking Makovicky (2010) reported that some of her participants experienced a divide between the patterns and practice as the printed texts of the published patterns were deemed to be too far removed from the sensorial experiences of lacemaking. While tutorial photographs and videos also cannot fully capture or transmit the embodied experience of performing craft techniques, I would argue that cosplayers experience less alienation from these instructional images. This is mostly due to the processes of production of cosplay tutorials. Many tutorials are created by cosplayers for cosplayers. Cosplayers also tend to personalise these tutorials including jokes, cartoons, photographs or video footage of their homes, friends and family. Cosplayers in Australia reported occasionally contacting tutorial creators through messaging, email or comments and were able to communicate directly with the creator. In this way photographic and video tutorials echo the face–to–face transmission of cosplay knowledge as skills are transmitted from one cosplayer’s living room to the next, though one cosplayer may be in Toronto and the other in Western Sydney.

8.7 Conclusion: Happening Things – Assembled Objects and Distributed Selves

In Hobart to attend the local Anime Island Convention (AICon) I was browsing in one of the city’s many second hand bookstores when I discovered a copy of the Japanese Cosplay magazine COSTume Mode (COSMODE). Struck by the serendipity of finding a Japanese cosplay magazine in a tiny Australian store the day before a local convention, I immediately decided to purchase it. The young male store assistant recognised the title and asked if I was going to AICon.

Back in my hotel room that afternoon, I was flicking through the pages of the magazine, admiring the detailed work of the Japanese cosplayers, when I noticed a photograph of a cosplayer dressed as Kusuri–uri. Kusuri–uri was the character I was intending the cosplay at the convention. I showed the photograph to my partner Patrick and we spent some time comparing the cosplay in the magazine with my costume which was currently draped over an armchair.
This small instance of serendipity is nonetheless an illustration of the ability of cosplay photography to traverse space and time, to connect local events and practitioners with global communities of practice. Referencing the meme quoted at the start of chapter, I have argued that ‘Pics’ are things that make things ‘happen’. Photographic images and activities are essential to the recreation of cosplay as a practice.

What role can digital photography and photographic practices play in shaping a heterogeneous and dispersed practice into a recognisable, relatively continuous entity? To explain photography’s many roles in cosplay I have followed the example of many cosplayers and I have traced the production and consumption contexts of each image. Ethnographic analyses inspired by the work of Gell (1998) have argued that photographs are both assembled and distributed (Edwards, 2012; Hirsch, 2004; Bell, 2008). Photographs can be ‘distributed objects’ performing different roles when shared online as part of a cosplay ‘art nexus’ (Gell, 1998). Cosplay photographs can also function as an aspect of ‘distributed personhood’ (Gell, 1998); through ongoing processes of ‘objectification’ (Miller, 1987) cosplayers and photographers create and recreate images as extensions of self. Gell’s (1998) concepts of distributed objects and personhood allow the ethnographer to examine the affective and functional aspects of photography, to explore the active role of photographs within the practice and the work they do in forming relationships and maintaining aesthetic styles.

Cosplay photographs are assemblages, the product of collaboration between cosplayer and photographer. These assemblages can be performative and improvisatory as creators draw upon found texts, objects, spaces and actors. Cosplay photographs can function as playful re–interpretations of pre–existing texts as cosplayers and photographers work together to create fantasy images that re–imagine characters in new settings and situations. This play can continue online through the display and interaction with uploaded images as further actors contribute to the assemblage and its interpretation.

Due to the close association between producers and product cosplay photographs can be deeply personalised digital objects. Within Australian communities of practice photographic images are far more than representations or remediations. Cosplay photography when displayed online on Facebook can act as an extension of self for both cosplayer and photographer. Through these distributed selves cosplayers are able to negotiate their position within communities. Sharing and displaying photographs online enables cosplayers to establish and reaffirm friendships and acquaintances with other practitioners.
met offline at events.

The online distribution of photography also recreates cosplay’s aesthetic values as well community–specific knowledge and competences across time and space. As shoot photography, convention snaps and other images are shared and evaluated on Facebook, aesthetic judgements are made by practitioners and images are accepted or rejected as examples of the practice. This role of photography in actively recreating the practice is perhaps most clearly evident in the less spectacular tutorial and panel imagery which is used to convey cosplay techniques and knowledge. In creating and posting photographic tutorials cosplayers share skills and practice–specific knowledge with cosplayers within local Australian communities and beyond. Techniques captured and distributed in photographic images may be used in localised costume assembly activities. A crepe hair tutorial created in the United States may be used to create a beard in Adelaide. In other ethnographic contexts photography may play a supporting role in the creation and maintenance of communities and practices. However, in the context of cosplay photography is absolutely integral to the recreation and distribution of the practice.
Chapter 9

Conclusion: Creativity and the (re)Creation of Practice and Practice Theories

Throughout the duration of this research project I regularly encountered confused, curious or occasionally hostile responses to the practice of cosplay itself, and my decision to study cosplay for an anthropological thesis. Memorable responses came from an anthropologist who joked that cosplayers were ‘probably mentally ill’, a dinner–party guest who claimed that I and the cosplay community were wasting taxpayer dollars, and a job interview panel who laughed in my face when I explained cosplay and my research project. The cosplayers themselves, however, did not seem to find the idea of cosplay as a research subject very unusual. Many of them commented to me that they thought I was very fortunate to be able to immerse myself in the world of cosplay seven days a week for the purposes of postgraduate study.

Negative reactions towards my decision to study cosplayers are understandable when placed within the contexts of the ‘Othering’ and trivialisation often directed towards cosplayers by outsiders. As Jenkins (1992) has argued, until recently fan producers/consumers, including cosplayers, have been ridiculed by mainstream media and largely ignored by sociological research. Within anthropology studies of dress practices, and indeed consumption more generally, have only gained popularity since the last decades of the twentieth–century with the development of a renewed interest in
material culture (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 1987). Despite pioneering work by Simmel and others, it has taken long time for a distinctive anthropology of dress to develop (Hansen, 2004; Eicher, 1995). This is due in part to dresss perceived cultural associations with feminisation, artificiality, triviality and surfaces, associations which have been later heavily critiqued or explored (Strathern, 1979; Woodward, 2007b). It is therefore not surprising that there has been little ethnographic research conducted on the practice and communities of costume–play.

However, an ethnographic study of cosplay can provide a new context for the exploration of some of anthropology’s most contemporary concerns: globalisation, consumption, performance, embodiment, identity and digitisation. In particular a study of cosplay can be used to explore ideas of practice, performance and process, concepts which underpin many of these emerging Post–Structuralist fields in anthropology.

As a highly heterogenous and dynamic practice, cosplay is a fertile field in which to test the limits of practice and community of practice as concepts. Cosplay contrasts strongly with many of the craft, dress and performance practices studied by anthropologists. It is a developing practice with few formal structures and organisations. Cosplay appears to be constantly moving and changing, lacking routinisation. There are no formally recognised bodies of techniques. Its cultural products are markedly varied as are its practitioners biographies. To outsiders cosplay may appear barely structured, a series of performance moments across time, a set of distantly related material objects.

In many ways the practice of cosplay in Australia challenges more traditional concepts of practice (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Shove et al., 2012) and practice communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). However, as I have argued throughout this thesis, despite its ephemerality, variety and dynamism cosplay in Australia does exist as a practice, as Giddens’ (1984) continuous entity, spanning time and space. It is underpinned by a number of structuring aesthetic and ethical principles: accuracy, completeness, spectacle, amateurism, and creativity, which are recreated and reinterpreted by cosplay practitioners.

Throughout this thesis I have explored the apparent paradox of cosplay: how can such a fragmented and diverse set of objects, individuals and performances function as continuous practice? How can practitioners identify certain performances as ‘cosplay’? How are skills and knowledge shared in the absence of structuring organisations? How do
practitioners determine what is good cosplay in competitions?

To address these questions I have argued that cosplay practice is created and recreated through assembly, negotiation and distribution processes. Inspired by the elemental model of practice developed by Shove et al. (2012), I have outlined an alternate model of cosplay as a practice in Australia, characterising the practice as a number of elements: meanings, materials, competences, practitioners and communities. Throughout this thesis I have explored how these elements come to be associated through the everyday activities of cosplayers. I have also drawn on anthropological material culture and performance approaches to better explore how ‘practices–as–performances’ create and recreate ‘practices–as–entities’ (Schatzki et al., 2000; Reckwitz, 2002). Many contemporary material culture and performance studies focus on the production of culture through practice and process. However, unlike many well-used generalised theories of practice, these studies tend to give greater focus to the micro actions of practitioners and their lived experience of practice.

Drawing on perspectives from material culture and performance studies, particularly the theoretical contributions of Miller (1987), Gell (1998), Goffman (1990) and Turner and Schechner (1988), I have argued that meanings, materials, competences, practitioners and communities are not connected through straightforward routinisation. Instead these elements are interconnected in ongoing assembly, negotiation and distribution processes.

Cosplay as creative and recreative practice can be best exemplified in a final ethnographic example. Cosplayer Daniel decided to rewrite the lyrics of a popular song, Daft Punk’s ‘Get Lucky’, with text referring to cosplay:

We’re up all night to the sun,  
We’ll work all night ‘til it’s done,  
We’re up all night for our cosplay.

(‘Up All Night for Our Cosplay’ lyrics)

The song referenced, among other things, the processes and frustrations of cosplay assembly, the creativity of cosplayers in repurposing household items, the discomfort of wearing costumes and a shared love of participating in the practice of cosplay. The song, with its reworked lyrics, was shaped into an a capella arrangement which was performed by cosplay circle, The Con Artists, as a skit for local convention competitions.
The song was later re–performed and recorded as part of a music video clip developed by The Con Artists and a local film maker. The video was uploaded online on YouTube and shared through Facebook.

The song is the product of assembly, negotiation and distribution processes. It is an assemblage of various elements: texts, technologies, skills, materials, spaces (on and offline), practitioners and audiences. It is the product of a series of negotiations: the lyricists negotiations with his source text, the performers negotiations with their audiences, and the negotiations between filmmaker and cosplay circle in the production of the video clip. It has been distributed through performance, through digital versions shared online and through the shared memories of participants.

This little song, as an assembled and distributed cultural product, also recreates the meanings and competences of cosplay practice and broader communities of practice. The song is a reflexive commentary on the nature of the practice. It celebrates ideas of creativity, amateurism, and accuracy which are key structuring principles of the practice. It was created through the assembly of cosplay competences and knowledge: dress competences, photographic skills, knowledge of performance and video genres. As a distributed performance it also facilitated the relationships between multiple practitioners: the co–creators of the live performance and their audience, the cosplayers and the filmmaker, and the co–creators of the film and their online audience. All aspects of cosplay – values, aesthetics, costume objects, performances, photographs, even practitioners and communities – are assembled and remade through practices–as–performances.

My ethnography has focused on practices–as–performances, the numerous activities that together form the practice of cosplay in Australia. In particular I have explored how cosplayers creatively assemble their cultural products. Focusing on the products of cosplay – costumes, performances and photography – has enabled me to trace the practice through multiple sites and dispersed practitioners.

This study of cosplay builds upon major themes of assemblage, distribution and negotiation developed in recent ethnographic work in both material culture and performance studies. Expanding upon existing discussions of agency and negotiation in other cultural contexts, this study of cosplay further demonstrates that dressed bodies can be sites of contestation between conflicting community values; performances can provide opportunities for reflexive contemplation of key community ideals.
Explorations of negotiation in dress literature and performance literature tend to focus on the ways that dress, or other forms of performance, can involve the negotiation of wider concerns of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, or modernity. In these studies the dress, theatrical or ritual performance is identified as a ‘flash point’ (Hansen, 2004, p.372) around which wider cultural concerns can be debated. However, in this thesis I have demonstrated that negotiations can also take place within the framing of the community of practice itself. Cosplay performances are can be sites in which aspects of sexuality, gender and ethnicity are contested (Lunning, 2011; Truong, 2013), but they are also the sites of internal negotiations. Negotiations can be practice or craft-specific as practitioners contest traditions, dominant aesthetics, and ethical values.

Chapter 5 explicitly examined the contested role of dressed bodies in the practice. Through participating in body projects, social dressing activities, competition performances and in panels and blogs, cosplayers negotiate competing values and debate the meaning of the practice itself. This conflict does not paralyse cosplay communities but instead inspires further recreations and variations in the practice as individual cosplayers negotiate their own position in relation to the debate.

The role of negotiation in performance is likewise a central theme of Chapter 7. In competition performance contexts cosplayers must negotiate conflicting community values as they attempt to assemble themselves as ‘master’ cosplayers. Like many other elements of cosplay practice, mastery is assembled, negotiated and distributed through practice. Competitors must cohere often conflicting cosplay values in their dressed bodies, competition interview narratives and prepared skits. If the qualities of mastery are united in the performance of a cosplayer this performance is then distributed throughout the community in the forms of photographs, videos and objects. Like costume objects, masters are also made and remade.

Exploring the negotiations of internal logics is crucial to gaining a better understanding of how specific practices function and are recreated; how individuals and communities each shape practices; how structures are created and contested.

The thesis contributes further to the development of the concepts of assemblage and distribution identified in anthropological studies of performance and material culture. In cosplay, as in many other contemporary dress and performance practices, relationships between individuals, communities, skills and objects are constantly being made and
unmade. Yet these temporary assemblages have the ability to create and recreate a practice as a continuous entity.

Ideas of assemblage and distribution tend to be used in material culture and performance studies as a means of describing micro-relations: the relationship of an artisan to their work, or the relationship between performer and audience. These small-scale processes can have great cultural significance but a study of cosplay further demonstrates how these same processes can occur on a more macro level of practice communities, as the community itself is also brought together and dispersed.

In Chapter 3, I explored the ways that cosplay values, including practice-specific forms of ‘skilled vision’ (Grasseni, 2007), are articulated and taught in convention panel performances. These temporary gatherings of novices, practitioners, and outsiders provide a reflexive context in which the meanings of the practice are made and remade.

The role of assemblage in (re)creation was also a central theme of Chapter 4. In this chapter I examined the (re)creation of costume objects as process of assembly, of texts, materials, practitioners and communities. In assembling cosplay costumes cosplayers not only recreate existing designs in the form of wearable objects but assemble and negotiate themselves as members of a practice community. It is in the processes of assembling a costume that cosplayers develop practice-specific skills and enact cosplay values and aesthetics.

The hallway performances of Chapter 6 appear like a microcosm of the practice itself. These performances are temporary assemblages, fleeting moments when cosplayers and spectators come together. Like other aspects of cosplay practice hallway performances can appear random and chaotic as spatial boundaries, roles and participation-frameworks can shift in an instant. However, despite these shifts participants in hallway performances are involved in framing and meaning-making activities. These performances are the product of ongoing negotiations between performer intentions and spectator interpretations.

In the final chapter I examined the role of photography and video in the recreation of practice and community. Photographs and videos as assembled and distributed objects perform important work in establishing practitioner relationships, facilitating community events, providing opportunities for contests of distinction and transmitting practice-specific skills and knowledge. Drawing on the work of Gell (1998) I have argued that
Cosplay photographs are assembled and distributed objects which perform important work within a cosplay art nexus. Photographs and videos assemble and distribute cosplay practice and communities.

A more dynamic model of practice that recognises practices as being constantly made and unmade may provide a means of understanding other ephemeral practices, including digital, sub-cultural, and grass-roots political movements.

In essence this thesis has attempted to examine the nature of recreation and creativity in practice. How can theories of practice account for both reproduction and variation? Structure and agency? Order and conflict? Cosplay, as a practice where a practitioner can recreate one character design in four different ways provides an excellent case study for exploring these issues.

This thesis is itself an assemblage. In attempting to characterise and explain the practice of cosplay I have drawn together multiple theoretical perspectives including generalised practice theories, anthropological material culture approaches and performance studies approaches. In particular I have argued that the emphasis on dynamism and negotiation found in material culture and performance perspectives can provide an expansion or correction of more generalist theories of practice.

In this thesis I have attempted to assemble a model of practice which could have broader applications. Cosplay may be diverse and dynamic but it is not the only practice which could be described in this way. Many other contemporary practices share cosplay’s ephemerality, dispersed populations and varied cultural products. A model of practice which depicts practices as emerging through the assembly, negotiation and distribution of elements may provide a means of exploring emerging and changing practices.

To outsiders cosplay may appear a strange and trivial practice, apparently of little concern to those aiming to study broader social movements and forces. However, anthropology has a long history of concerning itself with the apparently exotic and trivial. Perhaps the discipline’s greatest contribution to the understanding of human cultures and societies is its ethnographic methodology which explores everyday lived experiences of individuals and communities, micro-actions, material objects and performance moments as a means of understanding broader trends and movements. In this thesis I have argued that anthropological studies of materiality and performance with their focus on practices are well-positioned to address key weaknesses in broader, generalist
theorist of *practice*. In this way I hope that my small assemblage of a thesis can also engage with and (re)create broader discussions of practice and process.
Bibliography


BIBLIOGRAPHY


